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Man and Machine in Thoreau.

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MAN AND MACHINE IN THOREAU

A Dissertation

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Louisiana State University and
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by

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ABSTRACT

Many critics have regarded Thoreau as a selfish and egotistical critic of society, and have discerned a deep sense of bitterness in his life and works, particularly those of the post-Walden period. Thoreau, they feel, was unable to sustain the spirit of vitality and the zest for living which characterized the Walden years: his glorious vision, conveyed exuberantly in Walden, gave way, in their opinion, to pathetic glimpses of the shortcomings of humanity. A quite different Thoreau emerges upon a close examination of his attitude toward man and the machine and the artist's relation to both.

Thoreau's works, throughout his literary career, reveal a pervasive concern for the plight of the artist in an industrial society; they also reveal a sensitive hope in the moral betterment of mankind. Even in his early years at Harvard, Thoreau felt the life of his imagination to be in conflict with the material progress of the developing industrial age in America. He faced this conflict not as a cantankerous foe of the civilized life, and not as the selfish critic of any way of life that differed from his own. Rather, he sought, by his sometimes bitter, sometimes playful, yet always earnest and sincere criticism of man and machine, the most effective course to convey the deep love and concern which he felt for humanity.

What is presented in such works as A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with its laments at the ever-increasing factories, or "Civil Disobedience," with its bitter attacks against a government which breeds mechanical men, or Walden, with its challenge to mankind to lead spiritually productive lives, is not a blind or childish primitivism. For Thoreau, in such works, was seeking to justify the place of the machine in man's life: he had hopes of making the physical world--through its mechanical inventions--lead man to the attainment of the ideal. Hence, he attacked no one particular "trade" or "occupation"; rather, he opposed any way of life that he found to be essentially mechanical, devoid of love and true human brotherhood, and capable of dehumanizing mankind.

After scaling Maine's Mt. Katahdin and contemplating the horizon at Cape Cod, Thoreau discovered the elemental power of nature in a way that he had never done before. Aware of the basic good and evil of nature itself, Thoreau came to perceive that nature is the realm of life and death, but also the setting in which man may come to an awareness of his immortality. Hence, Thoreau, in his works of the post-Walden period, such as The Maine Woods, Cape Cod, "Walking," and "Life without Principle," rejected his earlier attempt to reconcile the machine and the life of the artist. Instead, he proposed a practical doctrine of conservation, whereby man can retain the true advantages

of civilization and yet preserve portions of the "wild" for his physical and spiritual edification. Thoreau's lifelong study of man and machine taught him, in his last years, of human limitations, but it also strengthened his belief in the regenerative function of nature. Enlightened and inspired, Thoreau retained his optimistic vision of human potential and accepted his death calmly. He left to mankind as his legacy both his works and his noble ethic of conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Thoreau's popularity among critics in recent years can be attributed in part to his prophetic vision of a society endangered by machines. His "relevance" among both political dissidents and ecologists is observable in celebrations of Thoreau ranging from Sierra Club posters to nation-wide performances of a play dealing with his memorable night in jail. Yet any attempt to make a detailed consideration of his attitude toward man and his machines should be conducted with the realization that, for Thoreau, the machine (like the government) was a force he must deal with consciously as an artist and not in a merely emotional way. In other words, the reaction of Thoreau to mechanization, while originating in his immediate sensory impressions, is carefully and artistically transformed into a symbolic literary experience. His literary life was, in a sense, an attempt to overcome the dangers of mechanization by the imaginative re-creation of his brief visions of the ideal.

In the earliest pages of his Journal, Thoreau provides us with a crucial clue to understanding his method of confronting the problem of man's increasingly technological society: "It is wholesome advice," he says in his Journal for February 9, 1838, "--'to be a man amongst folks.' 'Go into society if you will, or if you are unwilling, and take

a human interest in its affairs."¹ Whether we read Thoreau as "America's first conscientious public 'dropout'"² or as a good-humored and sociable man,³ we must be willing to admit that his lifelong pursuit of the ideal was coupled with a deep and sensitive cognizance of the plight of his fellow human beings.

The purpose of this dissertation is to trace the development of Thoreau's complex attitude toward man and mechanization, demonstrating (by a study of his writings, including his Journal) the pervasiveness in his works of the central conflict between man and machine and the artist's relation to both. In this study, I shall examine the literal and symbolic consequences which such a conflict held for Thoreau. It should be noted that I have utilized the chronology of Thoreau's works that Walter Harding, one of the soundest and most meticulous of Thoreau scholars,

¹ The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (1906; rpt. 14 vols. in 2, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), I, 27. The Dover edition of the Journal "is an unabridged republication of the work first published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in 1906." The work, which originally appeared in fourteen volumes, has been bound as two in a redesigned format. Future text citations will appear with the designation "DJ" and the volume and page number--as they appeared in the original published Journal--in parentheses.

² Leon Edel, Henry D. Thoreau, Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 90 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 9.

³ See in particular J. Golden Taylor, Neighbor Thoreau's Critical Humor, Utah State Univ. Monograph Series, No. 1 (Logan, Utah: Utah State Univ. Press, 1958).

has established in A Thoreau Handbook. While Harding candidly admits that "no final order of composition of Thoreau's works can be established,"⁴ he makes a carefully considered ordering of them. I find this to be both valid and convincing.⁵

There are particular difficulties (besides those of chronology) inherent in any attempt to examine Thoreau's attitude toward man and his mechanical productions. One of these is that of determining possible literary influences. Thoreau was a well-read writer and, as Harding cautions: "It is even more dangerous than usual to ascribe Thoreau's ideas to specific sources. . . . Thoreau was much too eclectic to follow completely the dictates of any school or any individual author."⁶ A second difficulty lies in the fact that Thoreau had no rigidly organized or highly structured approach to those subjects which he discussed in his writings. In Harding's words, "Before any attempt can be made to examine Thoreau's philosophy and present an organized analysis of his ideas, it is important to recognize that he never made any such attempt himself."⁷

⁴ A Thoreau Handbook (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1959), p. 41.

⁵ For the chronology which Harding establishes, see "Thoreau's Works," in A Thoreau Handbook, pp. 41-86.

⁶ A Thoreau Handbook, p. 102.

⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

Bearing in mind, then, both Thoreau's eclecticism and his lack of an organized philosophical position on any subject, the critic faces the need to determine which writers could most likely have exerted the greatest influences upon him, and what other factors were at work to promote his particular response to the mechanization of society. A final explanation must needs be made with regard to those types of mechanization that came under the scrutiny of Thoreau. No one particular "trade" or "occupation" was attacked by Thoreau in a narrow or biased way. Instead, Thoreau opposed any way of life that he found to be essentially mechanical, devoid of love and true human brotherhood, and capable of dehumanizing mankind. Thus, when he speaks disparagingly of "commerce" or "trade," he is not opposing an ancient and honorable enterprise; rather, he is finding fault with that type of capitalistic and exploitative venture which, in the nineteenth century, was symptomatic of an emphasis on mechanization of all kinds. Moreover, Thoreau was not arbitrarily opposed to all of the mechanical inventions that were then coming into prominence. Just as he attacked any career that degraded man (or any man that permitted himself to be so degraded), he expressed his dissatisfaction with the needless proliferation in mechanical production. If machines were being made merely for the sake of being made, Thoreau wanted no part of them.

In the following study, Chapter I deals with Thoreau's early literary career (to 1843). It places special emphasis on the influence Emerson's Nature and Carlyle's Sartor Resartus had on Thoreau in his initial efforts to formulate a literary response to the machine.

Chapter II covers the interval from 1843 to the publication of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in 1849. It emphasizes the conflict in Thoreau's thought between the petty necessities of actual life and his aspirations to the ideal. Compelled to work in a pencil factory, Thoreau nevertheless considered himself a poet. His literary career was consistently characterized by a vigorous life of the senses, but this life was subject to the influence of rare and short-lived rhapsodic visions which, Thoreau felt, were enjoyed only by men of genius, who possessed "uncommon sense."

Chapter III deals primarily with the principal accomplishment of Thoreau's two-year Walden experiment--his great work, Walden. But in doing so it covers the period of approximately five years (one of the most difficult stages of Thoreau's career) which preceded the publication of Walden in 1854. A detailed study of Thoreau's masterpiece reveals his continuing emphasis on the life of the senses. In one chapter of Walden, entitled "Sounds" (which presents his symbolic confrontation with the railroad), Thoreau offers his most sustained commentary on the relationship of the artist to man and machine.

Transcending the here-and-now in a symbolic vision, Thoreau recognizes and accepts the inevitability of technological progress. Walden, in its triumphant and affirmative tone, celebrates the superiority of the artistic over the practical life. The book is a testimony to Thoreau's fidelity to his deepest convictions.

Chapter IV, the concluding chapter of the present study, takes into account the period from the publication of Walden until Thoreau's death in 1862. Several of Thoreau's works, it must be noted, which were published posthumously were composed over a period of years and were revised just before his death. These are considered in Chapter IV. Many critics have considered Thoreau's life after Walden to be filled with bitterness and constant frustration; he was, they say, unable to sustain the glorious vision of Walden. But Thoreau, in his last years, rejects his earlier attempt to reconcile the machine and the life of the poet; rather, he proposes a practical doctrine of conservation, whereby man can retain the true advantages of civilization and yet preserve portions of the "wild" for his physical and spiritual edification. In such works as The Maine Woods and Cape Cod, Thoreau returns to the primordial realms of existence (the mountain-forest in the former, the ocean in the latter) and there confronts not only the "evil" of mechanization but also the basic good and evil of nature itself. Atop Mt. Katahdin, Thoreau trembles at the awesome power and indifference of the universe; at the shores of

Cape Cod he scans the horizon, contemplating the smallness of man and the possibility of death. Yet nature, Thoreau discovers, is not only the realm of life and death; it is also the setting in which man may come to an awareness of his immortality. The landscape, in all its wildness, must be preserved if the world is to survive. Aware of man's limitations but inspired by the regenerative function of nature, Thoreau retains his optimistic vision of human potential and accepts death calmly.

CHAPTER I
CONTEMPLATING THE MACHINE

...the mechanical forces have
not yet been generously and
largely applied to make the
physical world answer to the
ideal.

-Henry David Thoreau, "Paradise
(to be) Regained"

I

During the decade following Thoreau's commencement from Harvard in the summer of 1837, Concord was, like the rest of the country, undergoing the beginnings of a period of unprecedented technological change. The Concord which had existed at Thoreau's birth in 1817 "was a quiet little town of two thousand, devoted chiefly to agriculture"¹ and, indeed, the entire country, even as late as the 1840's, "was still largely agricultural."² As Carl Bode puts it, "the farmer was still the representative American man."³ Yet despite the predominance of agriculture during the formative period of Thoreau's life, industrial developments were afoot that would have a lasting effect on the American

¹ Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 3.

² Carl Bode, "Introduction," American Life in the 1840s, ed. Carl Bode (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967), p. xi.

³ Ibid.

landscape. With the phenomenon of the railroad in particular, Americans were witnessing both a literal and symbolic alteration of the pastoral way of life.

The majority of Americans (including Thoreau's Concord neighbors) gave the railroad their overwhelming acceptance and spoke of it in glowing phrases. Emerson remarks in his Journal for September, 1848, "'The Railroads is the only sure topic conversation in these days . . . which interests farmers, merchants, boys, women, saints, philosophers, and fools.'"⁴ Frequently, Leo Marx observes, "foreign travelers in this period testify to the national obsessive interest in power machinery." Marx refers to Michael Chevalier's comment that the American "'has a perfect passion for railroads; he loves them . . . as a lover loves his mistress.'"⁵ One important reason why Americans accepted the railroad so readily is that it represented a potential means of linking the country, of uniting it for commercial and cultural pursuits. In American Life in the 1840's, Carl Bode describes the railroad's impact: "Better transportation meant not only a busier, richer, more civilized America, it meant that the United States were coming closer to being united in culture as well as polity."⁶

⁴ Quoted in G. Ferris Cronkhite, "The Transcendental Railroad," New England Quarterly, 24 (1951), 308.

⁵ The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (1964; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 208.

⁶ "Introduction," American Life in the 1840s, p. xiii.

Emerson, G. Ferris Cronkhite points out, frequently praised the symbol of the rising technology, the railroad, as a "providentially supplied servant of Manifest Destiny."⁷

What made the development of the railroads such a significant and symbolic event in American history--to Thoreau as to countless of his literary contemporaries--was its invasion of the American wilderness. Leo Marx observes:

In spite of the resemblance between the train and the archetypal city of Western literature, the "little event" /the railroad/ creates an unprecedented situation. For in the stock contrast between city and country each had been assumed to occupy a more or less fixed location in space: the country here, the city there. But . . . the sound of a train in the Concord woods implies a radical change in the conventional pattern. Now the great world is invading the land, transforming the sensory texture of rural life--the way it looks and sounds--and threatening, in fact, to impose a new and more complete dominion over it.⁸

The railroad, indeed, was fast becoming "a significant and symptomatic part of American life,"⁹ an event whose import was felt by author and farmer alike.

The railroad was not the only manifestation of the growing technology in America. Cotton mills were becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly in New England, where factory girls toiled as second-class citizens for a mere

⁷ Cronkhite, p. 315.

⁸ Machine in the Garden, pp. 31-32.

⁹ Cronkhite, pp. 327-28.

\$3. a week.¹⁰ The number of roads, canals, and ships (as well as railroads and factories) proliferated, as Americans zealously sought to market their manufactured goods in the greatest quantities and in the shortest period of time.

In play as well as work, Americans grew fond of speed and competition. The widespread popularity of the steamboat races of about 1840 illustrates the emergent American obsession with speed. David Stevenson, an English engineer, came to America in 1838 to observe at close range the allegedly remarkable American steamboats; "he found them navigating the Hudson River and Long Island Sound at a speed far surpassing that of any European steamer."¹¹ About 1840, Baron de Gernster perceptively viewed the American fascination for the speed of the steamboat as symptomatic of the new American way of life: "'The Americans are, as is known, the most enterprising people in the world, who justly say of themselves, 'We go always ahead.' . . . The [steamboat] races are the causes of most of the explosions [which occur on steamboats], and yet they are still constantly taking place. The life of an American is, indeed,

¹⁰ Ironically, as Daniel J. Boorstin relates in The Americans: The National Experience (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 29, even the staunchly anti-American Charles Dickens, when he toured New England in 1842, was greatly impressed with the factories; he "could not restrain his enthusiasm, describing the contrast with the English mill towns as 'between the Good and Evil, the living light and deepest shadow.'"

¹¹ Ibid., p. 98.

only a constant racing, and why should he fear it so much on board the steamboat?"¹²

The American of the early nineteenth century, then, was restless in pursuit of both profit and pleasure. He was a "new man" in a "brave new world," as Howard Mumford Jones puts it in O Strange New World. This vast "new world" of America offered tremendous promise for man's personal enrichment, as Jones perceives: "the widening imaginative acceptance of the expansive qualities of American space and sky plays a leading role in American consciousness during the nineteenth century. . . ." ¹³ Yet when man, with his newly discovered mechanical power, came to exploit nature, to apply his energies heedlessly to mere mass production, he helped to perpetrate what Daniel J. Boorstin calls "the technology of haste . . . a technology of the present, shaped by haste, by scarcity of craftsmanship, of capital, and of raw materials, and by a firm expectation of rapid change in the technology itself."¹⁴

¹² Ibid., pp. 98-99. The railroads, too, exhibited the American obsession with speed, as Boorstin points out, emphasizing the physical danger inherent in such a situation: "Flimsy construction and fast speeds over poorly graded, sharp-curving, unfenced track on rough terrain caused numerous accidents" (p. 103). Even the generally imperturbable Charles Dickens "In 1842 . . . found his first ride in an American train of the Boston & Lowell line a terrifying experience" (p. 103).

¹³ O Strange New World, American Culture: The Formative Years (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), pp. 394-95.

¹⁴ Boorstin, p. 106.

If such developments aroused the ardor and excitement of Thoreau's Concord contemporaries, they elicited a cautious response from the youthful Thoreau, less than a year out of Harvard, as he wrote in his Journal for March 6, 1838:

How can a man sit down and quietly pare his nails, while the earth goes gyrating ahead amid such a din of sphere music, whirling him along about her axis some twenty-four thousand miles between sun and sun, but mainly in a circle some two millions of miles actual progress? And then such a hurly-burly on the surface--wind always blowing--now a zephyr, now a hurricane--tides never idle, ever fluctuating--no rest for Niagara, but perpetual ran-tan on those limestone rocks--and then that summer simmering which our ears are used to, which would otherwise be christened confusion worse confounded, but is now ironically called "silence audible," and above all the incessant tinkering named "hum of industry," the hurrying to and fro and confused jabbering of men. Can man do less than get up and shake himself? (DJ, I, 35)

Despite its stylistic awkwardness, this comment anticipates in imagery and tone the skillfully-woven prose of Walden.

Here, even as a young man of twenty, Thoreau senses the chaotic course that mankind is following, the "commercial spirit" which, virus-like, is "infesting the age with poison."¹⁵ Calling for man to "get up and shake himself," he foreshadows the boasting Chanticleer of Walden who attempts to awaken his neighbors to the disadvantages of living "in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century."¹⁶

¹⁵ Reginald L. Cook, Passage to Walden (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), p. 99.

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1893), II, 508. Subsequent references to the Riverside Edition will appear with the designation "W" and the volume and page number in parentheses.

Approximately one week later Thoreau speaks of the lack of genuine human contact in a supposedly civilized world: "In obedience to an instinct of their nature men have pitched their cabins and planted corn and potatoes within speaking distance of one another, and so formed towns and villages, but they have only assembled, and society has signified only a convention of men" (DJ, I, 39). This passage, recorded in the Journal for March 14, and incorporated into Thoreau's first lecture, on "Society," which was delivered at the Concord Lyceum on April 11,¹⁷ hints at the early disenchantment which Thoreau felt with the commercial and social structure of society.

Such skepticism was not altogether new: in the spring of 1837, for example, while still at Harvard, Thoreau was reading Emerson's revolutionary treatise, Nature. Walter Harding makes clear the impact of Nature upon Thoreau: "Although in later years Thoreau read Emerson rarely, Nature appeared at just the critical moment in his life and there is no question that he read it avidly. It was one of the seminal books in his life."¹⁸ Nature may be regarded as a tract against technology, for it contains many of Emerson's memorable comments on the subject. Thus, for the student Thoreau, profoundly captivated by the Emersonian world view, there was much of relevance to ponder.

¹⁷ Harding, Days, p. 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

In his "Introduction," Emerson looks at contemporary society and points out its tendency to live in the past: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers."¹⁹ He views the past more favorably than the present: "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes" (N, 5). He calls for a new spirit of vitality, a new awareness of the possibilities of human experience: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . The sun shines today also. . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts" (N, pp. 5-6).

Originality in living requires individuality and solitude rather than the pursuit of "vulgar things": "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read or write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things" (N, p. 9). To what "vulgar things" does Emerson refer? "Commodity," the second chapter of Nature, suggests the answer and provides an obvious point of similarity with Thoreau's later concept of "the useful arts":

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (1836; facsimile rpt. New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1940), p. 5. Future text citations will appear with the designation "N" and the page number in parentheses.

The useful arts are but reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man. He no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of AEolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. . . .

But there is no need of specifying particulars in this class of uses. The catalogue is endless, and the examples so obvious, that I shall leave them to the reader's reflection, with the general remark, that this mercenary benefit is one which has respect to a farther good. A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work. (N, pp. 17-18)

In "Discipline," Emerson reinforces his position by insisting that every "useful" task must perform a higher function, "an ulterior service":

Nothing in nature is exhausted in its first use. When a thing has served an end to the uttermost, it is wholly new for an ulterior service. In God, every end is converted into a new means. Thus the use of Commodity, regarded by itself, is mean and squalid. But it is to the mind an education in the great doctrine of Use, namely, that a thing is good only so far as it serves; that a conspiring of parts and efforts to the production of an end, is essential to any being. The first and gross manifestation of this truth, is our inevitable and hated training in values and wants, in corn and meat. (N, p. 52)

"Prospects," the final chapter of Nature, reveals Emerson's awareness of the irony inherent in the lives of men who work ceaselessly without question, without an understanding of the purpose of their lives: "At present, man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it, and masters it by a penny-wisdom; and he that works most in it, is but a half-man, and whilst his arms are strong and his digestion good, his mind is imbruted and he is a selfish

savage" (N, p. 89). Less than a year later, in "The American Scholar," he will lament that man has "become metamorphosed into a thing, into many things . . ." in a rapidly specializing society. He will observe the virtual mechanization of man: "The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship."²⁰

For Emerson, then, the useful arts are trivial or "gross" or "mean" or "squalid" if they exist for their own sake. Men who labor mindlessly and mechanically are "imbruted" and "selfish." "Mercenary benefit" must be but a stepping-stone to a deeper and more noble gain, that of the enrichment of man's soul. One of the essential lessons which Thoreau took from Nature was that the frenzy of commerce is ignoble if it fails to impart a dignity to the human race.

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), pp. 64-65.

II

It is highly likely that Thoreau adapted the Emersonian vision of commerce to his own comment on the subject, which he delivered as a "Part" in a "Conference" on "The Commercial Spirit" at the Harvard Commencement exercises on August 16, 1837.²¹ With the exaggeration and youthful zest still to be seen in A Week, Thoreau describes the freedom of mind that dominates his contemporaries, and blames such a feeling for the ill effects of "the commercial spirit": "The characteristic of our epoch is perfect freedom," he begins. "It has generated the commercial spirit" (W, XI, 7). Just what this spirit portends for mankind is made all too clear by the vigorous young graduate: "Man thinks faster and freer than ever before. He, moreover, moves faster and freer. He is more restless, because he is more independent than ever. The winds and the waves are not enough for him; he must needs ransack the bowels of the earth, that he may make for himself a highway of iron

²¹ F. B. Sanborn, ed., Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1894), p. 7. All quotations from "The Commercial Spirit" are from Sanborn, who reprints excerpts on pp. 7-9. Since Familiar Letters is Vol. XI of the Writings, I have so designated in the text. Sanborn, without offering any specific evidence, points out that the passage from "The Commercial Spirit" which he includes "is noteworthy as showing how early the philosophic mind was developed in Thoreau, and how much his thought and expression were influenced by Emerson's first book, -- 'Nature'" (pp. 10-11). Cook, in Passage to Walden, pp. 99-100, discusses briefly Thoreau's Commencement remarks on "The Commercial Spirit."

over its surface" (W, XI, 7). Man's "blind and unmanly love of wealth" (W, XI, 8), according to Thoreau, precipitates the commercial spirit, and it is "the power that still cherishes and sustains it" (W, XI, 8). So long as man, in his weakness, desires material profit, selfishness will pervade every aspect of his existence (W, XI, 8).

Not surprisingly, the remedy which Thoreau proposes, the pursuit of "manly and independent lives," suggests the language and tone of Nature: "Let men, true to their natures, cultivate the moral affections, lead manly and independent lives; let them make richer the means and not the end of existence, and we shall hear no more of the commercial spirit" (W, XI, 8-9). Also reminiscent of Emerson's essay is Thoreau's notion that, as dangerous as the spirit of commercialism is, it "is not altogether and without exception bad."

We rejoice in it as one more indication of the entire and universal freedom that characterizes the age in which we live,--as an indication that the human race is making one more advance in that infinite series of progressions which awaits it. We glory in those very excesses which are a source of anxiety to the wise and good; as an evidence that man will not always be the slave of matter,--but ere long, casting off those earthborn desires which identify him with the brute, shall pass the days of his sojourn in this nether Paradise, as becomes the Lord of Creation. (W, XI, 9)

Emerson had seen the pursuit of commerce as a means to a higher spiritual end; so, too, Thoreau perceives the lowly commercial spirit as but a means by which man can transcend greed and obtain an admirable self-fulfillment. For a man to reap the proper rewards from his work, he must

seek to keep his life in harmony with nature. Thus, Thoreau proposes that "the seventh should be man's day of toil, wherein to earn his living by the sweat of his brow; and the other six his Sabbath of the affections and the soul,--in which to range this widespread garden, and drink in the soft influences and sublime revelations of Nature" (W, XI, 9). Thoreau, in offering such a proposal, is not being either lazy or absurd. Rather, he is, in an ironic and exaggerated way, trying to make man realize that to work mindlessly and ignobly for six days is far less productive (in a spiritual sense) than to work only one day and devote the remaining six to the "Sabbath of . . . the soul." What is ironic and unfortunate is that, as Perry Miller indicates, such remarks "would not for a minute offend President Quincy or the Boston businessmen who assembled on August 16, 1837, to despatch these young men into commercial America."²² Those for whom the Commencement offered merely a "day off from pursuit of gain . . . would ceremonially applaud" as Thoreau launched into his attack on materialism.²³ Even "the most orthodox Whigs on the Harvard Corporation" would have viewed Thoreau's admonitions as representing only "what pious, high-minded youths were

²² Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal" (1840-1841) Together with Notes and a Commentary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), p. 40.

²³ Ibid.

expected to say."²⁴ Harvard--and the rest of society--would not take Thoreau seriously (and indeed some never did) until he put his beliefs into practice on the shores of Walden Pond.

III

At Harvard, Thoreau's reading of Carlyle, a friend of Emerson's, not only confirmed his own youthful beliefs about commercialism but also did much to strengthen his convictions about the subject. Sartor Resartus, first published in book form in America in 1836 (with an unsigned Preface by Emerson),²⁵ was "accessioned" by Harvard's debating society, "the Institute," in October of 1836 (one month after Emerson's Nature had been "accessioned").²⁶ It is most likely that Thoreau, who was a member of the organization, read the book as soon as he could, for it was much in demand and was, through Emerson's zealous

²⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵ Charles Frederick Harrold, "Introduction" to Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), p. lxiii.

²⁶ Kenneth Walter Cameron, Thoreau Discovers Emerson: A College Reading Record (New York: The New York Public Library, 1953), pp. 9, 15. See also Harrold, "Introduction" to Sartor Resartus, p. xxvii. Quite significantly, it was also through "the Institute's" library, rather than that of a conservative Harvard, that Thoreau was first exposed, on April 3, 1837, to the anonymously published Nature which "thereafter significantly determined the current of his thought," as Cameron asserts in Thoreau Discovers Emerson, p. 15.

promotional efforts, being enthusiastically accepted by its American audience.²⁷ Sartor Resartus was written at a time when England was beset with the economic unrest and social turbulence occasioned by the industrial revolution. To the relatively unpopular Carlyle of the early 1830's, "philosophy and religion seemed virtually dead";²⁸ the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, the radical economic proposals of Adam Smith, and the concept of laissez-faire seemed to be overrunning England.²⁹ "'Respectability with her thousand gigs'" had become "the symbol of the hollowness and concealed brutality of a mechanical age," an age in which "the application of machinery had begun to transform the land which Cobbett loved into the blackened England which Ruskin was to grieve over."³⁰ No doubt Carlyle's sober scrutiny of the situation, as well as his rambling, perhaps even chaotic style in Sartor Resartus, appealed to Thoreau. For such an approach served to point up "how little value Carlyle placed on systematic and logically impeccable presentations

²⁷ Harrold, "Introduction" to Sartor Resartus, pp. xxvi-xxvii. Harrold reveals that, while Sartor ironically failed to excite its English audience when it first appeared, it did, by its immense success in America, provide for "a highly creditable chapter in American literary insight" (p. xxvii).

²⁸ Ibid., p. xix.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. xx-xxi.

³⁰ Ibid., p. xxii.

of the 'truth.'"³¹ Carlyle, like Emerson, preferred to touch men in an emotional rather than an intellectual way. The same was to be true of Thoreau.

Sartor Resartus contains one diatribe after another against industrialism and the machine; Carlyle's language becomes more vehement as he proceeds in his descriptions and condemnations of the cold and calculating world of profiteering. A close examination of Sartor Resartus is therefore justified because the book, of which Thoreau was quite fond, was highly influential in shaping Thoreau's way of looking at the machine and in providing Thoreau with a sense of immediacy in his dealings with the industrial world.

Carlyle's criticism of the existing economic and social order is proclaimed at the outset of Sartor Resartus: "Man's whole life and environment have been laid open and elucidated; scarcely a fragment or fibre of his Soul, Body, and Possessions, but has been probed, dissected, distilled, desiccated, and scientifically decomposed."³² Man has formulated theories of gravitation, improved water transport, advanced in geology; "to many a Royal Society, the Creation of a World is little more mysterious than the cooking of a

³¹ Ibid., p. xxxii.

³² Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), pp. 4-5. Future text citations will appear with the designation "SR" and the page number in parentheses.

dumpling" (SR, p. 4). And yet, despite such vast and widespread achievements, "science" has overlooked "the grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue . . . which Man's Soul wears as its outmost wrappage and overall; wherein his whole other Tissues are included and screened, his whole Faculties work, his whole Self lives, moves, and has its being" (SR, p. 5). For Carlyle, the myriad scientific developments and social theories are insignificant unless they take into account the fundamental presence of man's soul. "Misdirected industry," he says a few pages later, "is seen vigorously thrashing mere straw" (SR, p. 7); "mercantile greatness," with its demands for practicality in all cultural pursuits, "cramps the free flight of Thought" (SR, p. 7). Like the Thoreau of Walden for whom "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in" (W, II, 155), Carlyle's speculative man, "'whose seedfield . . . is Time,'" considers no conquest significant "but that of new ideas" (SR, p. 9). Such a speculative man, Carlyle says in his playful chapter, "Editorial Difficulties," will herald the arrival of "Professor Teufelsdröckh's Book" (SR, pp. 9-10) and regard its hero's ideas as truth (SR, p. 14), unlike those contemporaries of the beer-drinking, pipe-smoking professor who consider him "not so much a Man as a Thing; which Thing doubtless they were accustomed to see, and with satisfaction" (SR, p. 18)--but with nothing more.

It is through Teufelsdröckh's observations of the world around him--and through his dramatic personal struggle

to overcome his cosmic despair--that Carlyle presents some of his most powerful and pervasive attacks on rampant materialism. The Professor, as the Editor tells us, looks from the watch-tower of his domicile "down into all that wasp-nest or bee-hive" of a world and observes "their wax-laying and honey-making, and poison brewing, and choking by sulphur" (SR, pp. 20-21). He perceives, in other words, the bustle of society, its productivity but also its injustices and competitiveness. At midnight, he is made aware of the wretchedness and misery of a vice-filled life that is quite alien to him: "Oh, under that hideous coverlet of vapours, and putrefactions, and unimaginable gases, what a Fermenting-vat lies simmering and hid!" (SR, p. 22). His neighbors sleep, caught up with the absurdity of their dreams: "Upwards of five-hundred-thousand two-legged animals without feathers lie round us, in horizontal positions; their heads all in nightcaps, and full of the foolishlest dreams" (SR, p. 23). Teufelsdröckh looks "in men's faces with a strange impartiality, a strange scientific freedom" (SR, p. 29) but, in his own intense conflicts he will of necessity abandon (at least temporarily) his ivory tower.

One of the essential lessons which the Professor's study of life teaches him is that of human flux. Nowhere is man found without tools: "without Tools he is nothing, with Tools he is all" (SR, p. 41). And it is not only man who changes and wreaks change: "For not Mankind only, but

all that Mankind does or beholds, is in continual growth, re-genesis and self-perfecting vitality" (SR, p. 40). The individual, then, if he is "of a speculative turn" (SR, p. 53), will experience a sense of bewilderment when he attempts to ponder his existence in a rapidly changing universe. He will isolate himself from his fellows in order to ask himself the crucial question "Who am I; what is this ME?" (SR, p. 53). Once again, there is a striking resemblance to the later Thoreau, for he would come to undertake precisely such a quest for self-discovery in the isolation of Walden. During such a venture, as Carlyle puts it, "The world, with its loud trafficking, retires into the distance; and, through the paper-hangings, and stone-walls, and thick-plied tissues of Commerce and Polity, and all the living and lifeless integuments (of Society and a Body), wherewith your Existence sits surrounded,--the sight reaches forth into the void Deep, and you are alone with the Universe, and silently commune with it, as one mysterious Presence with another" (SR, p. 53).

For Carlyle, as for both Emerson and Thoreau, the answer to the question of man's identity lies in the world of nature: "Sure enough, I am," Teufelsdröckh asserts, "and lately was not: but Whence? How? Whereto? The answer lies around, written in all colours and motions, uttered in all tones of jubilee and wail, in thousand-figured, thousand-voiced, harmonious Nature" (SR, p. 53). Nature, as Carlyle describes it through his famous clothes-metaphor, is but a

garment, which clothes the higher truths of life: "The thing Visible, nay the thing Imagined, the thing in any way conceived as Visible, what is it but a Garment, a clothing of the higher, celestial Invisible, 'unimaginable, formless, dark with excess of bright'?" (SR, p. 67).³³ Emerson, in Nature, attests to the same fundamental transcendental doctrine when he states that "Nature is the symbol of spirit" (N, p. 32). Thoreau, by his symbolic self-immersion into the Nature of Walden Pond, seeks to prove by his very life that the physical and sensuous world can be made to reveal the spiritual destiny of the individual.

However, the task of discerning nature's transcendent truths is not so simple as it may first appear, for man is so often overcome by the sights and sounds of life's routines, by the superficial aspects of his existence, that he fails to perceive the presence of the divine. "Where is the cunning eye and ear to whom that God-written Apocalypse will yield articulate meaning?" Carlyle's Professor asks, lamenting that "We sit as in a boundless Phantasmagoria and Dream-grotto; . . . sounds and many-coloured visions flit around our sense; but Him, the Unslumbering, whose work both Dream and Dreamer are, we see not; except in rare half-waking moments, suspect not" (SR, pp. 53-54).³⁴

³³ A few pages later, he will make the same point in a more explicit way, when he contends that "All visible things are emblems" (SR, p. 72).

³⁴ Thoreau, in A Week, will repeatedly make the same point, as he reflects on the evanescent way in which the poet captures his glimpses of the ideal. See, for example, W, I, 8, 373-74.

Life, then, is a dream and, ironically, most men sleep deepest when they consider themselves most awake (SR, p. 54).

For man to remain awake and aware of the secrets which nature offers him, he must maintain a sense of wonder. "Wonder," Teufelsdröckh says, "is the basis of Worship" (SR, p. 67). Science, however, tends "to destroy Wonder, and in its stead substitute Mensuration and Numeration" and thus it "finds small favour with Teufelsdröckh" (SR, p. 68). Exactly how little favor such science holds for Carlyle's hero can be seen in the Professor's vituperative remarks against mechanization, delivered, as his Editor takes care to make clear, "with charitable intent":

Shall your Science . . . proceed in the small chink-lighted, or even oil-lighted, underground worship of Logic alone; and man's mind become an Arithmetical Mill, whereof Memory is the Hopper, and mere Tables of Sines and Tangents, Codification, and Treatises of what you call Political Economy, are the meal? And what is that Science, which the scientific head alone, were it screwed off, and . . . set in a basin to keep it alive, could prosecute without the shadow of a heart,--but one other of the mechanical and menial handicrafts, for which the Scientific Head (having a Soul in it) is too noble an organ? (SR, p. 68)

Lest the reader miss the import of such a metaphorical passage (a not unlikely possibility), the Professor injects a clear-cut clarification: "I mean that Thought without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous . . ." (SR, p. 68). Thus, he cautions, "The man who cannot wonder . . . is but a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye. Let those who have Eyes look through him, then he may be useful" (SR, p. 69).

Part of Teufelsdröckh's powerful inner conflict arises from his failure to maintain his sense of wonder in a world of shallow men and their machines. After describing his obscure origin (in "Genesis," the first chapter of Part II), Teufelsdröckh presents, in "Idyllic," a vivid glimpse of his childhood delight in the world of nature; he paints a rather Wordsworthian picture of the young soul at one with his physical and spiritual environment. "Happy season of childhood," he exclaims, singing the praises of nature: "Kind Nature, thou art to all a bountiful mother; that visitest the poor man's hut with auroral radiance; and for thy Nurseling hast provided a soft swathing of Love and infinite Hope, wherein he waxes and slumbers, danced-round (umgaukelt) by sweetest Dreams" (SR, p. 90). In youth's carefree days, "Time is no fast-hurrying stream, but a sportful sunlit ocean" (SR, p. 90). However, as the experienced old man looks back at himself, he cautions in retrospect: "Sleep on, thou fair Child, for thy long rough Journey is at hand!" (SR, p. 90).

Having acquired a "certain deeper sympathy with animated Nature" (SR, p. 93), Gneschen, the young Diogenes, gradually begins to discover with amazement "that Entepfuhl stood in the middle of a Country, of a World; that there was such a thing as History, as Biography; to which I also, one day, by hand and tongue, might contribute" (SR, p. 95). Like the young Thoreau for whom Concord would become symbolic

of society as a whole,³⁵ Gneschen comprehends that "Any road, this simple Entepfuhl road, will lead you to the end of the World!" (SR, p. 95).³⁶ A child of nature, he discovers that the cycle of the seasons, with its "vicissitudes of contribution" (SR, p. 97), is an alphabet "whereby in aftertime he was to syllable and partly read the grand Volume of the World" (SR, p. 97).

Yet even as a mere boy, Diogenes is not so naive as to assume that "my felicity was perfect" (SR, p. 97). For, as he puts it, "Among the rainbow colours that glowed on my horizon, lay even in childhood a dark ring of Care, as yet no thicker than a thread, and often quite overshadowed; yet always it reappeared, nay ever waxing broader and broader; till in after-years it almost over-shadowed my whole canopy, and threatened to engulf me in final night. It was the ring of Necessity whereby we are all begirt . . ." (SR, p. 97). His "Freewill" (SR, p. 98) collides painfully with Necessity as he is made to obey the strictures of his

³⁵ See, for example, John Aldrich Christie, Thoreau as World Traveler (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 201-02 especially, and also pp. 208, 210, 215, 223, 229, 239-40.

³⁶ Carlyle's concept of the universality of a particular place is echoed, in rather striking fashion, by Thoreau, in the concluding lines of his poem, "The Old Marlborough Road," which he incorporated into his celebrated essay, "Walking":

If with fancy unfurled
You leave your abode,
You may go round the world
By the Old Marlborough Road.

(W, IX, 264, vv. 62-65).

The poem also appears in Carl Bode, ed., Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau, enlarged ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 17-19.

"orderly house" (SR, p. 98), but Teufelsdröckh says that, since his upbringing was "loving," "well-meant, honest" although rigorous, frugal, secluded, and unscientific, "Let me not quarrel with my upbringing" (SR, p. 99).

If the Professor will not censure the stern but sincere guardians of his youth, he will, nevertheless, severely criticize his neighbors and early teachers, vain and self-seeking men who gave his developing years "bitter rivulets of tears, here and there stagnating into sour marshes of discontent" (SR, p. 103). Teufelsdröckh recalls a long-gone Whitsuntide morning when he had observed a small dog running in terror, some "human imps" having tied a tin-kettle to its tail (SR, p. 103). The Professor, in his recollection, turns into a social critic of the first magnitude as he describes what the dog has come to represent: "Fit emblem of many a Conquering Hero, to whom Fate (wedding Fantasy to Sense, as it often elsewhere does) has malignantly appended a tin-kettle of Ambition, to chase him on; which the faster he runs, urges him the faster, the more loudly and more foolishly" (SR, p. 103). The teachers of Diogenes are little better than the greedy inhabitants of Entepfuhl. They are "hide-bound Pedants, without knowledge of man's nature, or of logic; or of aught save their lexicons and quarterly account-books" (SR, p. 105). They teach Greek and Latin "mechanically" (SR, p. 104) and cram "Innumerable dead Vocables" into their students, and call it "fostering the growth of mind" (SR, p. 105).

At the University, Teufelsdröckh becomes "ill at ease" (SR, p. 113) because he is made aware of the "vain jargon of controversial Metaphysic, Etymology, and mechanical Manipulation falsely named Science" (SR, p. 113). Yet, as dismal as his education has been, it has fostered within him a realization of the tragedy of man's wasted potential and thus provided him with a need to live life rather than merely exist: "Nay, many so spend their whole term, and in ever-new disappointment, shift from enterprise to enterprise, and from side to side: till at length, as exasperated striplings of threescore-and-ten, they shift into their last enterprise, that of getting buried" (SR, pp. 119-20).

Unfortunately, the hero's involvement in life takes the form of a compulsive love for Blumine and the abortive love affair casts him "through the ruins as of a shivered Universe . . . towards the Abyss" (SR, p. 146). Wandering almost insanelly, he comes at last to the solitude and protectiveness of the wilderness, "as if in her mother-bosom he would seek healing" (SR, p. 149). He experiences at last a vision of the divinity and maternal benevolence of Nature, and "a murmur of Eternity and Immensity, of Death and of Life" (SR, p. 151) penetrates his soul. However, the chance appearance of Blumine and her husband Towgood terminates his glimpse of nature's beauty and compels the hero into a chaotic course of wandering. "He has," as the Editor observes, "now lost all tidings of another and higher world" (SR, p. 158).

Teufelsdröckh, then, is a prisoner of "The Everlasting No" because he "accepts evil, necessity, limitation, and suffering as alone real, and therefore denies a moral order in the universe, and regards all faith, goodness, apparent freedom, and happiness as a contemptible illusion."³⁷ The student who had bewailed the mechanical and brutal way in which men treat one another now, in his own blindness, virtually forgets that his fellow human beings are alive and "not merely automatic" (SR, p. 164). He pictures the universe itself as a menacing machine which threatens to destroy all life: "To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb" (SR, p. 164). Nevertheless, by at least being able to question his fear, he can reach the "Centre of Indifference," a state in which he discovers his self, while failing to establish any outlets for the creative life.³⁸ He therefore regards man as trivial, a "whining" creature in "this paltry little Dog-cage of an Earth" (SR, p. 182), yet, as his perceptive Editor suggests, he will eventually be able to cast aside his burden and assume "a second youth" (SR, p. 182).

Teufelsdröckh's "second youth," however, will not reflect the naive and untried optimism of "Idyllic": rather, it will reveal a wiser vision of man's true capabilities in

³⁷ Harrold, Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, pp. 157-58, n. 2.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 169, n. 1.

a turbulent and seemingly mechanical world. "The Everlasting Yea" contains Carlyle's exultant picture of the triumphant artist, a man who has been tempted by the world's selfishness and baseness and who, nevertheless, can regain his sense of the divine in Nature. By seeing that Nature is but a synonym for God (SR, p. 188), by refusing to subject his life to the crass Utilitarian pursuit of pleasure, by affirming "the reality of moral values above the material,"³⁹ he can become, at last, a true transcendentalist, a man whose duty is his ideal. Hence, even the most de-meaning forms of human endeavor, if seen as but visible means to a higher end, will lead man to a self-awareness and a recognition of the ideal: "The Situation that has not its Duty, its Ideal, was never yet occupied by man. Yes here, in this poor, miserable, hampered, despicable Actual, wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere is thy Ideal: work it out therefrom; and working, believe, live, be free" (SR, p. 196). Moreover, man, realizing that God is in Nature, that "the Universe is but one vast Symbol of God" (SR, p. 220), will make the ultimate transcendental assertion--that man himself is "but a Symbol of God" (SR, p. 220).

In a world in which mankind is smothered by "the Genius of Mechanism" (SR, p. 221), Carlyle's Sartor Resartus vigorously denies that man is a mere machine. Teufelsdröckh,

³⁹ Ibid., p. 192, n. 3.

restored by his "Everlasting Yea," asks boldly: "Am I to view the Stupendous with stupid indifference, because I have seen it twice, or two-hundred, or two-million times?" (SR, p. 259). Answering his own question, he contends: "There is no reason in Nature or in Art why I should: unless, indeed, I am a mere Work-Machine, for whom the divine gift of Thought were no other than the terrestrial gift of Steam is to the Steam-engine; a power whereby cotton might be spun, and money and money's worth realized" (SR, p. 259).

IV

Thoreau, even as the young man of the pre-Walden years, objected strongly to the mechanistic philosophy which Carlyle condemned in Sartor Resartus, as his review, "Paradise (to be) Regained," published in the Democratic Review for November, 1843 makes unmistakably clear.⁴⁰ The review, an attack on J. A. Etzler's utopian essay, "The Paradise within the Reach of all Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery," "drew from Thoreau," as Reginald L. Cook so aptly puts it, "neither the pouncing enthusiasm of a volatile temperament nor the supercilious disparagement of the croaker."⁴¹

Etzler's essay is, as its very title indicates, a glib Utopian proposal that describes the magnificent usefulness of the machine. In his vision of a world of

⁴⁰ Cook, Passage to Walden, p. 100. Cook provides a brief but relevant discussion of Thoreau's essay on pp. 100-04. See also Harding, Days, pp. 140-41.

⁴¹ Cook, Passage to Walden, p. 100.

virtually total material prosperity, Etzler describes a "Mechanical System" of machines and he theorizes that the members of his utopian community could obtain their daily necessities "by a short turn of some crank."⁴² One has only to regard such a passage as the following, quoted by Thoreau in his essay, to capture the fervor of Etzler's euphoric scheme:

"Fellow-men! I promise to show the means of creating a paradise within ten years, where everything desirable for human life may be had by every man in superabundance, without labor, and without pay; where the whole face of nature shall be changed into the most beautiful forms, and man may live in the most magnificent palaces, in all imaginable refinements of luxury, and in the most delightful gardens; where he may accomplish, without labor, in one year, more than hitherto could be done in thousands of years; may level mountains, sink valleys, create lakes, drain lakes and swamps, and intersect the land everywhere with beautiful canals, and railroads for transporting heavy loads of many thousand tons, and for travelling one thousand miles in twenty-four hours; may cover the ocean with floating islands movable in any desired direction with immense power and celerity, in perfect security, and with all comforts and luxuries, bearing gardens and palaces, with thousands of families, and provided with rivulets of sweet water; may explore the interior of the globe, and travel from pole to pole in a fortnight; provide himself with means, unheard of yet, for increasing his knowledge of the world, and so his intelligence; lead a life of continual happiness, of enjoyments yet unknown; free himself from almost all the evils that afflict mankind, except death, and even put death far beyond the common period of human life, and finally render it less afflicting. Mankind may thus live in and enjoy a new world, far superior to the present, and raise themselves far higher in the scale of being." (W, X, 38-39)

⁴² J. A. Etzler's essay, "The Paradise within the Reach of all Men . . .," is quoted by Thoreau in "Paradise (to be) Regained," Writings (Riverside Edition), X, 57 and subsequent references to Thoreau's quotations from the essay will appear with the designation "W" and the volume and page number in parentheses.

It is not surprising to discover that the Thoreau who had, in "The Commercial Spirit," ironically urged that mankind work but one day and meditate on the other six, will not be deceived by the glib and rosy picture drawn by Etzler. For Thoreau, like Carlyle had done before him, regards noble human activity, or true "Industry," as the basis for admirable productivity: "We will not be imposed upon by this vast application of forces," he says, adding realistically, "We believe that most things will have to be accomplished still by the application called Industry" (W, X, 60). Etzler would have man earn his livelihood "no more . . . by the sweat of his brow," but by turning a crank (W, X, 59). Thoreau, too, says that man can thrive by using a crank, but the crank he speaks of is "the crank within," "the prime mover," "a certain divine energy" which is present in every man (W, X, 59). Such an energy, significantly enough, is highly reminiscent of Carlyle's "grand Tissue of all Tissues"--that spirit which is capable of ennobling the human soul.

Thoreau thinks no "really important work" can "be made easier by cooperation or machinery" (W, X, 59). Etzler's system of what Thoreau calls "transcendentalism in mechanics" (W, X, 40), if it provides "enlarged ideas, and grander conceptions of our duties in this world" (W, X, 38), ultimately fails, Thoreau says, because "it aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely" (W, X, 66). In Sartor Resartus Carlyle attacks the Utilitarian pursuit of

pleasure because it mechanizes man and promotes the foolish notion that man's happiness can be legislated (SR, p. 191); Thoreau castigates Etzler for his Utilitarian, short-sighted vision. Essentially, Etzler's earthly paradise is an impossible dream because "the mechanical forces have not yet been generously and largely applied to make the physical world answer to the ideal" (W, X, 69). The wind is "an almost incalculable power" placed at man's disposal, yet he makes but a "trifling" use of it (W, X, 47); the power of tides and waves is used only in a "slight" and "irregular" way (W, X, 48); indeed, of the true potential of all "the Powers below" (W, X, 52), man is virtually ignorant. "The question is, not how we shall execute, but what," Thoreau says, in one of his numerous pithy remarks (W, X, 52). "Let us not use in a niggardly manner what is thus generously offered" (W, X, 52), he cautions, and he will be compelled to remind his audience on this identical score in Walden, when he observes with distress that the latest of man's inventions, the railroad, is failing to live up to its great potential.

What Thoreau urges, therefore, and what Carlyle had urged, too, is the application of "moral powers" (W, X, 67), "the power of rectitude and true behavior" (W, X, 67), rather than that of a mere "Mechanical System." If the individual has "faith in the prevalence of a man" (W, X, 62), he will be motivated by love more powerful than any machine. Thoreau suggests this in a passage which is,

curiously enough, remarkably similar in its tone, style, rhythm, and even meaning to St. Paul's celebrated passage on love: "Love is the wind, the tide, the waves, the sunshine. Its power is incalculable; it is many horse-power. It never ceases, it never slacks; it can move the globe without a resting-place: it can warm without fire; it can feed without meat; it can clothe without garments; it can shelter without roof; it can make a paradise within which will dispense with a paradise without" (W, X, 68).⁴³ Thoreau's paradise, as A Week and Walden indicate, lies within his mind, in the realm of his poet's imagination.

Although Thoreau, in "Paradise (to be) Regained," confidently asserted the boundless potential of love, his brief period on New York's Staten Island in 1843 shocked him into the realization that all men are not motivated by love. His first-hand observations of the international commercial enterprises and of the essentially machine-like city dwellers foreshadow his later disenchanted remarks on the machine and his attacks against a stagnant society in the pages of Walden. Thoreau went to Staten Island, chiefly at the suggestion of Emerson, "to acquaint himself with the literary world of the city."⁴⁴ He found this environment

⁴³ St. Paul says, in part: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

⁴⁴ Harding, Days, p. 152.

to be a serious threat to his literary career, rather than the advantage that Emerson hoped it would be. True, Thoreau spent some pleasant hours with Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York Tribune, who, as Thoreau's self-appointed literary agent, did much to promote his early efforts.⁴⁵ But he found New York had relatively few inhabitants of the caliber of Horace Greeley.

At first, Thoreau was simply impressed by the splendid array of trading ships which he confronted as he surveyed Staten Island. In a letter to his parents dated May 11, 1843 (shortly after his arrival) he writes, somewhat excitedly: "I have already run over no small part of the island, to the highest hill, and some way along the shore. . . . Far in the horizon there was a fleet of sloops bound up the Hudson which seemed to be going over the edge of the earth; and in view of these trading ships commerce seems quite imposing."⁴⁶ In the fascination of curiosity, he visited telegraph stations, mills, and waterworks in the vicinity of the island.⁴⁷ But as John Aldrich Christie says of the young man's enchantment, "The enthusiastic approval of commerce which he so often expressed seemed

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

⁴⁶ Walter Harding and Carl Bode, ed., The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 99-100. The passage is also quoted by Christie, p. 18. Future text citations will appear with the designation "Corr." and the page number in parentheses.

⁴⁷ Christie, p. 18.

rooted more firmly in his instinctive yearning for an identification with all parts of the world; for a kind of spiritual global barter, than in any strong views on the role of trade in the world's economy."⁴⁸ Thoreau found no venture, commerce included, meritorious if it offered man no opportunity to better himself in a way that could not be measured by dollars and cents.

The city itself, with its masses of unfeeling people (one recalls the denizens of Carlyle's *Enteufuhl*) elicited only Thoreau's disgust and dismay. He had come to the city to do something noble with his relatively unproductive life,⁴⁹ but he later became a homesick and isolated stranger. In his Journal for September 24, 1843 he writes bitterly: "Who can see these cities and say that there is any life in them? I walked through New York yesterday--and met with no real and living person."⁵⁰ He laments in a letter to Emerson, dated June 8, 1843: "I don't like the city better, the more I see it, but worse. I am ashamed of my eyes that I behold it. It is a thousand times meaner than I could have imagined. It will be something to hate,--that's the

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁹ Harding, Days, pp. 145, 152-56.

⁵⁰ Huntington Journal Fragment quoted in Christie, p. 19. Thomas Blanding, in his unpublished undergraduate thesis at Marlboro College, an edition of "The Text of Thoreau's Fragmentary Journals of the 1840's," 1970, p. 27, transcribes the passage as follows: "Who can see these cities and say that there is any life in them? I walked through New York yesterday--and met no real and living person." Quoted by Permission.

advantage it will be to me; and even the best people in it are a part of it and talk coolly about it. The pigs in the street are the most respectable part of the population. When will the world learn that a million men are of no importance compared with one man?" (Corr., pp. 111-12).⁵¹

The manner in which Thoreau voices such feelings of shame when his eyes behold the city and its depravity suggests the fundamental rationale of his reaction to commercialism and technology. His senses, he feels, will be weakened, his perceptions dulled, if he permits them to succumb to the stifling attractions of the actual. This is why, in Walden for example, he expresses his refusal "to have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled" by the railroad's "smoke and steam and hissing" (W, II, 192). Thoreau, even at twenty-five, suffering as a tutor and part-time magazine salesman in New York,⁵² considered himself first and foremost an artist. To the artist, perhaps more than to anyone else, the vitality and acuteness of the senses are important. Staten Island admittedly offered Thoreau the fascination of the commercial fleets and the attraction of the sea; it provided him with the

⁵¹ The passage is also quoted by Harding, Days, p. 149.

⁵² Harding, Days, p. 145-48, 152. Thoreau, at Emerson's instigation, tutored the three children of Emerson's brother William (p. 145). In addition, "He tried unsuccessfully to earn a little selling subscriptions to the Agriculturist and traveled up the city as far as Manhattanville in that endeavor" (p. 152).

opportunity to visit with Horace Greeley and to meet Henry James, Sr., of whom he said enthusiastically: "It was a great pleasure to meet him. It makes humanity seem more erect and respectable. . . . he has naturalized and humanized New York for me" (Corr., p. 110).⁵³ However, more often than not, the city filled him with glimpses of the hollowness of urban life. By December 17, 1843, after a Thanksgiving visit to Concord and a hasty retreat to New York to gather his belongings, he was once again firmly entrenched in his hometown.⁵⁴ As Walter Harding so tellingly puts it, "Staten Island was not Concord."⁵⁵

⁵³ The passage is also quoted by Harding in Days, pp. 149-50.

⁵⁴ Harding, Days, pp. 155-56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

CHAPTER II
THE PENCIL-MAKER AS POET

What, after all, does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods, who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?

-Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

I

If his stay at Staten Island caused Thoreau to perceive the shortcomings of civilization, it made him more acutely aware of the artistic role of the senses and the necessity of their being preserved. It made him admire even more the country and the health-giving world of nature. Before his luckless journey to New York, he had made a clear case for the rural life (inspired by Concord and its environs) in his essay, "Natural History of Massachusetts," first published in the Dial on July 1, 1842.¹ Early in the essay, Thoreau incorporates a poem

¹ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 44.

of his own which exalts the world of nature for inspiring man's spirit to soar above the dullness of life: "Within the circuit of this plodding life,/ There enter moments of an azure hue," he optimistically asserts (W, IX, 127, vv. 1-2), at the outset.² The poem continues with a reminiscence of the coming of winter and reveals Thoreau's delight in the serenity and simplicity of the natural world. The poet sees, "High in my chamber in the frosty nights" (W, IX, 127, v. 9), in the light of the moon, "icy spears" which glisten in the rising sun (W, IX, 128, vv. 12-13). Then, thinking momentarily of "the shimmering noon of summer past" (W, IX, 128, v. 14), he recalls the faded humming of a bee, the "youthful sound" of a "busy rill": though the fields now lie all covered with snow, he remembers the fertile furrows that are "but late upturned" (W, IX, 128, vv. 18-28). Thus refreshed by this vision of the productivity of nature, he can return to his daily tasks, as he makes clear in a concluding couplet which anticipates some of the playful and yet profound verse of Robert Frost: "So by God's cheap economy made rich,/ To go upon my winter's task again" (W, IX, 128, vv. 29-30).³

Thoreau sets down another poem a few pages later to reinforce his earlier contention that even the simplest

² The poem also appears in Bode, ed., Collected Poems, enlarged ed., p. 3.

³ Frost's brief poem, "Dust of Snow," is but one example of that type of verse which, like Thoreau's, celebrates the simplicity of nature as a means of

delights of nature, products of "God's cheap economy,"
surpass the triviality of the artificial. The simple song
of the vireo is enough to make man forget his petty concerns:

Upon the lofty elm-tree sprays
The vireo rings the changes sweet,
During the trivial summer days,
Striving to lift our thoughts above the street. ⁴
(W, IX, 138)

"In society you will not find health," Thoreau says,
"but in nature" (W, IX, 129). He adds, "The doctrines of
despair, of spiritual or political tyranny or servitude,
were never taught by such as shared the serenity of nature"
(W, IX, 129). He asserts: "I am the wiser in respect to
all knowledges, and the better qualified for all fortunes,
for knowing that there is a minnow in the brook. Methinks

alleviating the cares of the here-and-now:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

Taken from Robert Frost, Selected Poems of Robert Frost
(New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), p. 138.
Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constella-
tions of Intention (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963),
pp. 72-73 speaks of an "irreverence and ironic joking"
in some of Thoreau's poems, and his "seriocomical reflec-
tions" (even in his prose) as characteristics that Frost
considered particularly appealing.

⁴ The poem also appears in Bode, ed., Collected
Poems, enlarged ed., p. 6.

I have need even of his sympathy, and to be his fellow in a degree" (W, IX, 146).

Nature, indeed, "has taken more care than the fondest parent for the education and refinement of her children" (W, IX, 153). And so it is that, even for those who provide mere "facts," mere scientific data and statistics, Thoreau has no contempt: such men have at least paved the way for future "truths": "The true man of science," Thoreau says at the end of his essay, "will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men" (W, IX, 161). Facts, when considered through man's "serene and retired spirit" (W, IX, 131), and when applied in conjunction with a keen sensuous approach to nature's beauties, will provide the true man of science with "a deeper and finer experience" than that of his more short-sighted contemporaries (W, IX, 161). It is for this reason that Thoreau can maintain-- "with the sublime assurance of a saint" as Leo Marx says⁵-- that we must not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (W, IX, 160).

Hawthorne, among others, was favorably impressed with "Natural History." His comments, in the American Notebook for September 1, 1842, indicate his perceptive appreciation of Thoreau's use of the senses as the basis

⁵ "Introduction" to Henry David Thoreau, Excursions (New York: Corinth Books, 1962), p. ix.

for artistic excellence.⁶ Thoreau, he says, "is a keen and delicate observer of nature,--a genuine observer,--which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness."⁷ Discussing the essay itself, he adds:

Methinks this article gives a very fair image of his mind and character,--so true, innate, and literal in observation, yet giving the spirit as well as the letter of what he sees, even as a lake reflects its wooded banks, showing every leaf, yet giving the wild beauty of the whole scene. Then there are in the article passages of cloudy and dreamy metaphysics, and also passages where his thoughts seem to measure and attune themselves into spontaneous verse, as they rightfully may, since there is real poetry in them. There is a basis of good sense and of moral truth, too, throughout the article, which also is a reflection of his character; for he is not unwise to think and feel, and I find him a healthy and wholesome man to know.⁸

"A Walk to Wachusett," first published in the Boston Miscellany in January, 1843,⁹ is another of Thoreau's pre-Staten Island writings revealing his early efforts to

⁶ F. B. Sanborn, in Hawthorne and His Friends: Reminiscence and Tribute (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1908), pp. 25-26n says, in regard to this same appreciation of Hawthorne's: "Considering how little Thoreau had published at that early date, and that Hawthorne had never heard him before, this is a remarkable appreciation of the man, and shows Hawthorne's insight into human character, when he was not misguided by friendship or enmity, and could subdue that singular optimistic pessimism that appears so continually in his books."

⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1883), IX, 318.

⁸ Hawthorne, Works, IX, 318.

⁹ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 45.

assess his surroundings and to assert the supremacy of nature's simplicity over man's mere "progress." Prefacing the account of his walk with a rather lengthy poem celebrating Mount Wachusett, "who like me/ Standest alone without society" (W, IX, 165, vv. 59-60),¹⁰ Thoreau describes his determination to undertake the expedition to the mountain-top. Interestingly enough, he expresses his fear that his visions of natural beauty will be terminated all too abruptly in a sentence which, either intentionally or inadvertently, he repeats exactly in A Week: "At length, like Rasselas, and other inhabitants of happy valleys, we resolved to scale the blue wall which bound the western horizon, though not without misgivings that thereafter no visible fairyland would exist for us" (W, IX, 165-66).¹¹

Despite such a fear, Thoreau regains his confidence, for he realizes--with the perception of the artist--that the true landscape is that which exists in man's imagination: "In the spaces of thought are the reaches of land and water, where men go and come. The landscape lies far and fair within, and the deepest thinker is the farthest traveled" (W, IX, 166). Accordingly, although he regards his contemporary civilization as one that is "raw and modern" (W, IX, 169), he sees the natural realm of Wachusett,

¹⁰ The poem also appears in Bode, ed., Collected Poems, enlarged ed., pp. 47-50.

¹¹ For the passage in A Week, see W, I, 215.

in the elevated confines of his imagination, as a place of nobility and delight:

As we gathered the raspberries, which grew abundantly by the roadside, we fancied that that action was consistent with a lofty prudence; as if the traveler who ascends into a mountainous region should fortify himself by eating of such ambrosial fruits as grow there, and drinking of the springs which gush out from the mountain sides, as he gradually inhales the subtler and purer atmosphere of those elevated places, thus propitiating the mountain gods by a sacrifice of their own fruits. The gross products of the plains and valleys are for such as dwell therein; but it seemed to us that the juices of this berry had relation to the thin air of the mountain-tops. (W, IX, 174)

Exalted by such simple pleasure, Thoreau finds it more meritorious for a village, which has "as yet, no post-office, nor any settled name" (W, IX, 172), to "recline on its own everlasting hills, and not be looking out from their summits for some petty Boston or New York in the horizon" (W, IX, 173). Atop the summit of Wachusett, he reads Virgil and Wordsworth "with new pleasure" (W, IX, 176), reveling in the physical remoteness which separates him from the demeaning aspects of terrestrial life: "It was a place where gods might wander, so solemn and solitary, and removed from all contagion with the plain" (W, IX, 177).

Like Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh, who had contemplated the greed and folly of mankind from his watchtower, Thoreau reflects upon the base and so-called "civilized" activities of society from his mountain perch: "A mountain-chain determines many things for the statesman and philosopher. The improvements of civilization rather creep

along its sides than across its summit. How often is it a barrier to prejudice and fanaticism! In passing over these heights of land, through their thin atmosphere, the follies of the plain are refined and purified; and as many species of plants do not scale their summits, so many species of folly no doubt do not cross the Alleghanies" (W, IX, 182). However, this very passage offers more than a mere condemnation of "progress"; it suggests the fundamental way in which nature--here particularized in the mountain-top--can provide man with such glimpses of the ideal as will inspire him to a realization of the pettiness of human pursuits. As "A Walk to Wachusett" draws to its conclusion, Thoreau the traveler, in his "repose and quiet" (W, IX, 185), looks back from whence he came and, listening to a robin's simple evening song, contrasts "the equanimity of nature with the bustle and impatience of man" (W, IX, 185). In "A Winter Walk," which first appeared in the Dial for October, 1843, and which, according to Walter Harding, contains nature descriptions which reveal "Thoreau at his best,"¹² he will again use nature, this time in the form of a snow-covered glen, as a refreshing contrast to the cities: "Here reign the simplicity and purity of a primitive age, and a health and hope far remote from towns and cities" (W, IX, 209). The snow itself, by its very ability to fall, obliterates man's

¹² Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, pp. 46-47.

tracks and exhibits nature's supremacy. As Thoreau puts it, in a light-hearted Frostian manner: "With so little effort does nature reassert her rule and blot out the traces of men" (W, IX, 221).

Thus Thoreau, reasserting his belief in the ennobling role of nature, appeals, at the end of "A Walk to Wachusett," for man to bring a "mountain grandeur" into "the desultory life of the plain" (W, IX, 185). Inspired by his imagination, man can soar spiritually; he can attain those "moments of an azure hue" which Thoreau, in "The Natural History of Massachusetts," had promised could be found "Within the circuit of this plodding life": "We will remember within what walls we lie, and understand that this level life too has its summit, and why from the mountain-top the deepest valleys have a tinge of blue; that there is elevation in every hour, as no part of the earth is so low that the heavens may not be seen from, and we have only to stand on the summit of our hour to command an uninterrupted horizon" (W, IX, 185-86).¹³ Mount Wachusett is,

¹³ Richard Colyer, "Thoreau's Color Symbols," PMLA, 86 (1971), 999-1008 presents an interesting analysis of the symbolic significance of colors upon Thoreau's imagination. Blue, he says, was Thoreau's "only color for the esthetic, distancing, even mystical atmosphere of meditation" (p. 1001). And of azure Colyer asserts: "Azure variously represents softness, tranquility, the ethereal, the mood of meditation, and essential relation to the heavens rather than to the earthbound sky. It is blue at its symbolic bluest" (p. 1003). Blue and azure figure strongly in both "The Natural History of Massachusetts" and "A Walk to Wachusett."

then, an effective imaginative spawning-ground from which Thoreau's "bird of paradise," the poet, will arise, eventually to appear on the pages of A Week.

II

Just as birth itself is a painful process, so, too, is the period in which a poet tests his literary wings. For Thoreau, the glorious business of becoming a full-fledged artist was tangled with the wretched necessity of working at a pencil factory. Like the Teufelsdröckh who, in his spiritual journey, was not permitted to remain aloof from society, so Thoreau, in his pencil-making career, and in his later encounters with the technological world, was unable--and, indeed, unwilling--to sever himself totally and without qualification from the pursuits of "this plodding life."

Although Leon Edel alleges that Thoreau "was always willing to allow others--society--to do for him what he would not do himself,"¹⁴ Henry S. Salt, a perceptive early biographer of Thoreau, offers a much more plausible picture of Thoreau's work habits:

Idleness, however, formed no part of Thoreau's "loitering"; he was not one who would permit himself to be dependent on the labour of others; for he was well aware that one of the most significant questions as to a man's life is "how he gets his living, what proportion of his daily bread he earns by day labour or job work with his pen, what he inherits, what steals." Apart from the chosen occupation of

¹⁴ Henry D. Thoreau, p. 9.

his lifetime, to which he devoted himself with unflagging industry and zeal, he conscientiously supported himself by such occasional labour as his position required, toiling from time to time (to quote an illustration which he was fond of using) like Apollo in the service of Admetus.¹⁵

And, according to Walter Harding, author of the most thoroughly documented life of Thoreau, Thoreau was a young man of great mechanical aptitude, much more so, for example, than Emerson: "Thoreau was as dexterous as Emerson was unhandy. Laughingly, he said he once shut the window of a railroad car when all the other passengers had failed, and was offered a job in a factory on the spot. Emerson marveled at his dexterity, thinking it was a miracle that he could select exactly a dozen pencils at every grasp when he was helping his father with packaging, that he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig like a dealer. . . ."¹⁶

When he found himself jobless after resigning a teaching position in Concord in 1837 (the celebrated whipping incident),¹⁷ he decided to join his father in business. Yet even working with his immediate family brought him no satisfaction: the work itself was routine. Despite his discontent, he designed a grinding-mill which produced a fine graphite, and thus made it possible for

¹⁵ The Life of Henry David Thoreau (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1896), p. 36.

¹⁶ Harding, Days, p. 127.

¹⁷ For an account of the incident see Harding, Days, pp. 52-54.

his father's factory to produce "the first American pencil that was equal to those produced in Germany."¹⁸ Although the fine graphite dust no doubt contributed to the further deterioration of Thoreau's lungs,¹⁹ he spent time at the factory as late as 1841 to obtain spending money²⁰ and returned to the factory in earnest after his return from Staten Island, complaining to Emerson that "he could think of nothing else" than the pencil works, and that "even in his dreams he worked at the new machines."²¹ When the business prospered, due in great measure to recent improvements of Thoreau's, he spent long hours in the shop, sacrificing his field excursions, so that the family could afford a new house.²²

Yet by the spring of 1845 it became obvious to Thoreau that his writing would have to come first and, as he reports so jubilantly in Walden, he celebrated July 4, 1845--Independence Day--by relinquishing his commercial pursuits and taking to the woods to get down to the "business" of

¹⁸ Harding, Days, p. 56.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

²¹ Ibid., p. 157.

²² Ibid., p. 177. Such unselfish labor on the part of Thoreau makes it difficult, indeed impossible, to concur with Edel, who alleges in Henry D. Thoreau, p. 27, that Thoreau was "a self-preoccupied and self-indulgent man" who condemned others in a "cruel" and "sanctimonious" way for not adhering to his standards of simplicity in living.

writing. It turned out to be a highly successful business. Both A Week and Walden (to be considered in detail later) were the tangible literary fruits of Thoreau's productive experiment in living at Walden.

At least two essays, written during this same crucial period, are manifestations of Thoreau's sustained interest in the conflict between the artist and the mechanized society in which he exists. The first, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," initially appeared as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum on February 4, 1846 and through the endeavors of Horace Greeley was subsequently published in Graham's Magazine for March and April, 1847.²³ This essay, described as "the only extended essay by Thoreau on the literary work of a contemporary,"²⁴ reveals both the respect which Thoreau feels for Carlyle as a writer and the highly significant way in which the author of Sartor Resartus shaped his awareness of the evils of industrialism.²⁵ Furthermore, this

²³ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 49 and Harding, "Introduction" to Henry David Thoreau, Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers (Montreal: Harvest House, 1963), p. xi. The Carlyle essay, along with "Civil Disobedience" and others, was collected and published posthumously in 1866, under the title, Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers.

²⁴ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 50.

²⁵ After examining Carlyle's Sartor Resartus in detail and demonstrating Thoreau's fondness for it and his employment of some of Carlyle's criticisms of technology in his own writings, I find it difficult to agree with the suggestion of Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939), p. 317 that "'Sartor Resartus,' which he /Thoreau/ had read while in college, had puffed his mind full of vague self-confidences." For, even at the outset of his literary career, Thoreau's attitude toward technology --and toward the artist in relation to it--was anything but "vague."

extended critical piece contains one of Thoreau's frankest admissions concerning the nature of "exaggeration," a vital concept which may be said to underlie his approach to technology and, in fact, his approach to virtually every subject with which he deals.

The essay begins with a brief examination of Carlyle's background and shifts quickly into heartfelt praise of Carlyle. When Thoreau describes Carlyle's widespread popularity in America, he is no doubt inspired by the recollection of reading Sartor Resartus at Harvard for the first time: "When we remember how these volumes came over to us, with their encouragement and provocation from month to month, and what commotion they created in many private breasts, we wonder that the country did not ring, from shore to shore, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with its greeting; and the Boones and Crocketts of the West make haste to hail him, whose wide humanity embraces them too. Of all that the packets have brought over to us, has there been any richer cargo than this?" (W, X, 86). Thoreau continues: "It is the best apology for all the bustle and the sin of commerce, that it has made us acquainted with the thoughts of this man. Commerce would not concern us much if it were not for such results as this. New England owes him a debt which she will be slow to recognize" (W, X, 87). Shortly thereafter, Thoreau describes his good fortune at having discovered Carlyle at such a propitious stage in his literary career: "Only he who has had the

good fortune to read them [Carlyle's works] in the nick of time, in the most perceptive and recipient season of life, can give any adequate account of them" (W, X, 89).

Much of the remainder of "Thomas Carlyle and His Works" centers around a consideration of Carlyle's style and diction, his humor, and his role as historian and prophet. Yet, in the final pages of the essay, in an extended paragraph on the nature and necessity of exaggeration, Thoreau provides us with a valuable clue to understanding his conception of the conflict between the artist and the machine. The passage indicates as much about Thoreau the writer as it does about Carlyle:

Exaggeration! was ever any virtue attributed to a man without exaggeration? was ever any vice, without infinite exaggeration? Do we not exaggerate ourselves to ourselves, or do we recognize ourselves for the actual men we are? Are we not all great men? Yet what are we actually, to speak of? We live by exaggeration. What else is it to anticipate more than we enjoy? The lightning is an exaggeration of the light. Exaggerated history is poetry, and truth referred to a new standard. To a small man every greater is an exaggeration. He who cannot exaggerate is not qualified to utter truth. No truth, we think, was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, so that for the time there seemed to be no other. Moreover, you must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing, and so you acquire a habit of shouting to those who are not. By an immense exaggeration we appreciate our Greek poetry and philosophy, and Egyptian ruins; our Shakespeares and Miltons, our Liberty and Christianity. We give importance to this hour over all other hours. We do not live by justice, but by grace. As the sort of justice which concerns us in our daily intercourse is not that administered by the judge, so the historical justice which we prize is not arrived at by nicely balancing the evidence. In order to appreciate any, even the humblest man, you must first, by some good fortune, have acquired a sentiment of admiration, even of reverence, for him, and there never were such exaggerators as these. (W, X, 127-28)

Thoreau uses "infinite exaggeration" to reveal the vices of mankind; he praises Concord and Carlyle because "We give importance to this hour over all other hours"; he "must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing"; the Chanticleer of Walden must brag lustily "in order to wake my neighbors up" (W, II, title pg.). Like those simple beauties of nature which exist to be freely enjoyed, Carlyle's works serve as sources of "entertainment" and "provocation," "without expense of acknowledgment even," as Thoreau says at the conclusion of his essay (W, X, 129-30). But the essay is Thoreau's lofty acknowledgment of Carlyle and, in language and imagery similar to that of the concluding pages of Walden, he praises Carlyle for making "the world seem richer for us, the age more respectable, and life better worth the living"; Carlyle's works, he says, are "silently accepted out of the east, like morning light as a matter of course" (W, X, 129-30). Carlyle, succeeding in dramatizing the dehumanization of man and asserting man's ultimate ability to triumph over technology, has captured the unending esteem of Thoreau the artist and Thoreau the citizen of a rapidly changing world.²⁶

²⁶ John J. McAleer, "Thoreau's Reputation--Past and Present," Artist and Citizen Thoreau, ed. John J. McAleer (Hartford, Conn.: Transcendental Books, 1971), p. 4 speaks of Thoreau's many concerns as both man and writer in this way: "Whereas other eras tolerated only one Thoreau at a time--the disciple, the naturalist, the philosopher, the reformer, or the stylist--today, recognizing him as 'artist and citizen,' we encompass all."

III

While Thoreau's essay on Carlyle exhibits his gratitude to Carlyle, "Civil Disobedience," the second highly important essay of the Walden period, makes clear his ironic gratitude to Concord for also providing him with a keen awareness of the mechanization which pervades virtually every segment of society. The essay, delivered as a Lyceum lecture in the winter of 1848 and first published as "Resistance to Civil Government" in Elizabeth Peabody's Aesthetic Papers for May, 1849,²⁷ is much more than a bitter tract of nonconformity. Rather, it is, in a very real sense, Thoreau's appeal for imaginative and healthy individuality in the face of a society of "wooden men" who are so dehumanized that they cannot, or will not, make an effort to decry the ruthless machinations of a power-hungry government.

"Although the essay does tie itself down to specific political issues, it is basically more universal in its approach," as Walter Harding perceives.²⁸ Therefore, Thoreau, to protest against slavery, lashes out at the Massachusetts poll tax, but he goes far beyond this to reveal the mechanical way in which government, just as dehumanizing industry or commercial exploitation, operates

²⁷ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 50; "Introduction," Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers, p. ix.

²⁸ A Thoreau Handbook, pp. 50-51.

for its own gains. Very early in the essay, Thoreau makes exactly such a criticism of "the American government." He begins with an ironic praise of that type of government which is profitable for both citizen and ruler alike:

"It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy the idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage" (W, X, 132). Thus far, the governmental process is, at least in some ways, "excellent," according to Thoreau: "It is excellent, we must allow" (W, X, 132). But a closer examination shows that it is not the government, but the "character" of certain inspired Americans, which accounts for any greatness America might have: "The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way" (W, X, 132).

The government often becomes an obstacle to creative human pursuits, forcing men of "character" to become slaves of systematization:²⁹

²⁹"Slavery in Massachusetts" pursues this idea even more bitterly than does "Civil Disobedience." A discussion of "Slavery" appears in Chapter III of this dissertation.

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. (W, X, 135)

Ironically, these worthless beings, whose bodies become the tools of the state, "are commonly esteemed good citizens" (W, X, 135). But they, like the legislators, lawyers, and ministers who "serve the state chiefly with their heads," and who "are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God" (W, X, 135), are not "men" to Thoreau. It is only the rare few, the "heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense" (W, X, 135-36)--those who "serve the state with their consciences" (W, X, 136)--who are worthy of such a name.

There is no doubt that Thoreau includes himself in that company of heroic individuals whose dedication goes unrewarded, or even unnoticed, by the masses: "He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish . . ." (W, X, 136). His brief quotation from Shakespeare's King John suggests quite clearly the pride of Thoreau as a man and as a writer, as well as his emphatic refusal to demean himself for any political institution:

"I am too high-born to be propertied,
To be a secondary at control,

Or useful serving-man and instrument
 To any sovereign state throughout the world."³⁰
 (W, X, 136)

Lest the point go unnoticed (which, being so directly made, is unlikely), Thoreau introduces it into the essay with a short but telling summation, this time drawn from Hamlet, of Shakespeare's tragic portrayal of the cosmic individualist: "A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be 'clay,' and 'stop a hole to keep the wind away,' but leave that office to his dust at least" (W, X, 136).³¹ Only a dead man should properly become a "clay" figure: but those who serve a mere institution unquestioningly with their bodies are, in a very great sense, already dead to Thoreau.

Thoreau adopts a tone of urgency, suggesting revolution as the last-ditch course of action for checking the process of governmental dehumanization of the individual. He says that the state is a machine and the citizenry its "friction" and points out the healthiness of such a relationship: "All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil" (W, X, 137). However, in the particular case of a government which tolerates slavery, "the friction comes to have

³⁰ Henry David Thoreau, The Variorum Walden and The Variorum Civil Disobedience, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1967), p. 366, n. 11.

³¹ Ibid., n. 10.

its machine" (W, X, 137); in other words, those individuals and groups that should be acting to check the government and balance its mechanical decisions are failing to do so and are indeed becoming part of the machine. When this happens, Thoreau says desperately, there is no alternative but to destroy the machine:

But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty and slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army. (W, X, 137)

That the machine which he attacks is an American-made one and the invading army itself is American, does not arouse in Thoreau a fear of personal punishment at its hands. Rather, it makes him all the more urgent in his appeal for integrity and individuality. One "man," for Thoreau, is a far greater commodity than any machine.

Unfortunately, Thoreau says, the vast majority of Americans to whom "Civil Disobedience" is addressed, Thoreau's omnipresent "mass of men," are more concerned with their commercial pursuits than they are with any endeavor to examine the quality of their lives. "Practically speaking," he says, "the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in

humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may" (W, X, 138-39). Some of these men, he says later, may be "in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war" (W, X, 139), yet they "even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What, he asks, "is the price-current of an honest man and patriot to-day?" (W, X, 139).

Not surprisingly, Thoreau's unfavorable picture of his callous contemporaries does not stop here. Repeatedly he resorts to what John J. McAleer refers as his "therapeutic vituperations"³² in order to startle society into a recognition of its mediocrity. In his exaggerated and ironic way, he laments over the scarcity of "men" and points out that "Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large" (W, X, 141). Thoreau at this point offers a devastating portrait of what might be called "the ugly American," who is a slick but superficial specimen indeed:

The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow,--one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the Almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a

³² "The Therapeutic Vituperations of Thoreau," American Transcendental Quarterly, No. 11 (Summer 1971), rpt. in Artist and Citizen Thoreau, ed. John J. McAleer (Hartford, Conn.: Transcendental Books, 1971), pp. 81-87.

fund for the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently. (W, X, 141-42)

Assessing the significance of his memorable night in jail, Thoreau reveals that, paradoxically, his isolation has permitted him to obtain a much greater awareness of the true character of his neighbors than he might otherwise have known. He discovers that they are "a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are" (W, X, 160); they are afraid to run any risks in their daily tasks; and, finally, they hope, "by walking in a particular straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls" (W, X, 160). However, despite such a disconcerting discovery, Thoreau is reluctant to condemn society completely, for he adds immediately, "This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that many of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village" (W, X, 160).

What Thoreau possesses, and what he would argue that his neighbors lack, is a sense of individuality, an assurance of the uniqueness of his identity. "I know," he readily admits, "that most men think differently from myself; but those whose lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred subjects, content me as little as any" (W, X, 165). Since to Thoreau the key to individuality lies within the realm of the mind, in man's

imagination, he has only pity for a "half-witted" state which, by locking him up, believes that it has kept him under its control: "As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have had a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it" (W, X, 155-56).

Thoreau exhibits pity and disgust for a machine-like state, and for a society which he finds to be composed of callous, or imperceptive, or apathetic creatures, those who allow no place for imagination in their lives. Yet, fearful of allowing himself to be "biased by obstinacy, or an undue regard for the opinions of men" (W, X, 162), he makes no self-righteous claims for his particular course of action. Rather, he urges that each man "see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour" (W, X, 162). (Similarly, in Walden, he makes no unqualified demands that "the mass of men" live precisely his mode of existence.) As Thoreau himself puts it, "I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors" (W, X, 164). "I seek rather," he continues, ". . . even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land" (W, X, 164). Yet, when he tries "to discover a pretext for conformity" (W, X, 164), he

examines society (including the State and the Constitution) not from the lowly common perspective, but from "the highest"; when viewed from this vantage-point of the imagination, virtually everything appears trivial. It is for this reason that Thoreau considers the individual superior to the government (W, X, 169) and men of imagination above the distracting demands of the state: "If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free, . . . unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him" (W, X, 165).

Accordingly, to one who is, even while imprisoned, so "thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free," the very jail itself can become the vehicle for imaginative insight. Indeed, for Thoreau, a night in jail becomes an imaginative and creative sensory experience which is as revealing in a fundamental way as a walk in the woods or the Walden experiment itself. As Thoreau puts it so exuberantly: "It was like traveling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town-clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the village. . . . It was to see my native village in the light of the Middle Ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights and castles passed before me. . . . It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it" (W, X, 158-59). Concord, the "estimable place" of Thoreau's birth (DJ, IX, 160), comes under his soulful

scrutiny during his brief imprisonment in a clearer way than it had ever done before. Focused at the center of his consciousness, it becomes an index of the shallowness of man. However, despite the dehumanization and the presence of the jail, the village offers to the poet "visions of knights and castles," indicative not of an escape into the past, but of the heroic potential of the individual; thus, Concord is also the setting in which man may better himself through a willingness to perceive his own limitations. This same Concord, as viewed by Thoreau from the relative isolation of Walden Pond, provides him with an awareness of man's baseness, as well as opens to him the secret of spiritual regeneration. Thoreau exults in his imprisonment for, like his experiment at Walden, it allows him to offer a symbolic praise for the life of the mind. It may be said that Thoreau was arrested "in the nick of time" (as he would put it), for his overnight examination of himself and his native village resulted in "one of our great documents of human freedom."³³

If Thoreau's call for "a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor" (W, X, 169-70) comes across as pie-eyed optimism or utopian foolishness, it is only because his audience has been conditioned into a belief that conformity produces comfortable security. Thoreau

³³ Harding, Days, p. 208.

himself realistically recognizes that his vision is perhaps too extraordinary to gain immediate acceptance: he calls his imagined world of individual supremacy the stepping-stone to "a still more perfect and glorious State" (W, X, 170) at the conclusion of "Civil Disobedience." Such critics as Perry Miller would, perhaps, regard such an assertion as a statement of an impossible dream,³⁴ but a clue to Thoreau's more likely motivation may be found in an unpublished Journal fragment dated October 24, 1843 (not very long before the Walden period): "Though I am old enough to have discovered that the dreams of youth are not to be realized in this state of existence, yet I think it would be the next greatest happiness always to be allowed to look under the eyelids of time and contemplate the perfect steadily with the clear understanding that I do not attain to it."³⁵ For Thoreau, it was the quest for the ideal, not necessarily its attainment, which motivated both his literary and non-literary life.

IV

Given such a noble calling as that of seeking truth in its highest forms, Thoreau found it difficult to exist in a world which constantly expected practicality. At one

³⁴ Consciousness in Concord, p. 30.

³⁵ Blanding, "The Text of Thoreau's Fragmentary Journals," p. 42. The passage is also quoted in Carl Bode, ed., The Selected Journals of Henry David Thoreau (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1967), p. 73.

point in A Week, he bluntly challenges the practical way of life, and simultaneously betrays the deep personal conflict which he must endure in order to survive both as a man and a man of letters: "What, after all, does the practicalness of life amount to?" he asks. "The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods, who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?" (W, I, 181-82).

Perry Miller has appropriately referred to Thoreau's early years (reflected in his Journal for 1837 to 1854) as "efforts to discover how to be conscious of the self in a commonplace, prosperous American town."³⁶ And the youthful Thoreau himself took great relish in describing his career as a struggling Apollo. He had written, for example, to Mrs. Lucy Brown, on September 8, 1841 (at the age of twenty-four): "I am as unfit for any practical purpose--I mean for the furtherance of the world's ends--as gossamer for ship-timber; and I, who am going to be a pencil-maker tomorrow, can sympathize with God Apollo, who served King

³⁶ Consciousness in Concord, pp. 51-52.

Admetus for a while on earth" (Corr., p. 47).³⁷ The would-be poet, compelled by circumstances to labor at a pencil factory, sought the company of the divine. His quest for earthly paradise was one which was necessarily marked by a hard-hitting and courageous resistance to formidable obstacles. For Thoreau the stakes were high: should his efforts fail, his existence would become one without purpose. Rather than face the insanity that the mindless acceptance of a materialistic way of life would bring, he chose to pursue a literary career that, to some of his contemporaries at least, was insane. The gods, he felt, would understand.

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, written at about the same time as the Carlyle essay and "Civil Disobedience," is Thoreau's first large attempt to confront the technological world through the poetic language of exaggeration.³⁸ The book has often been discussed as the young Thoreau's somewhat disjointed mythic voyage into the

³⁷ The letter also appears in Sanborn, ed., Familiar Letters, p. 39 and is quoted by Miller, Consciousness in Concord, p. 76. Miller then quotes from Thoreau's Journal for August 6, 1851 (nearly ten years after the letter to Mrs. Brown): "'Who is King Admetus? It is Business, with his four prime ministers Trade and Commerce and Manufactures and Agriculture'" (p. 77). See also DJ, II, 378.

³⁸ This portion of Chapter II, dealing with A Week, is essentially that which appeared as my essay, "Technology and the Artist in A Week," American Transcendental Quarterly, No. 11 (Summer 1971), rpt. in Artist and Citizen Thoreau, ed. John J. McAleer, pp. 87-91.

past.³⁹ However, in his insistent concern for the plight of the artist in a rapidly expanding technological society, Thoreau manifests a keen concern for the future. By focusing on the dilemma of the artist in an industrial world, Thoreau makes A Week a book that is concerned to almost a startling degree with a crucial contemporary theme.⁴⁰ As has been shown, Thoreau's literary life, even in its incipient stages, was preoccupied with the attempt to reconcile the harsh actuality of daily life with what he called "the real" or the "ideal." In A Week, perhaps Thoreau's most powerful opponent from the realm of the

³⁹ Although Walter Harding describes the Week as "one of the classics of American literature" (in "Introduction" to Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, ed. Walter Harding /New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1963, p. vii), he also maintains that it is "probably Thoreau's least read book" because of its numerous "digressions," A Thoreau Handbook, p. 56. For extended and perceptive critical evaluations of the Week, see Sherman Paul, The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958), especially pp. 191-233; William Drake, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," from "A Formal Study of H. D. Thoreau," Thesis. Univ. of Iowa 1948, rpt. in Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962); and Jonathan Bishop, "The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week," ELH, 33 (1966), 66-91. Portions of F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968) are also relevant and useful to a study of the Week.

⁴⁰ Among others, Marx, Machine in the Garden and R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955) treat at length Thoreau's encounter with the forces of technology, but they focus almost exclusively on Walden in their discussions.

actual is the machine--or rather, that which it embodies, the technological advancements which herald the encroachments of commerce upon the "healthy natural tumult" of the world of nature (W, I, 6).⁴¹ Thoreau, early in his first published book, culls Journal passages as well as ideas expressed in his vigorous review, "Paradise (to be) Regained," in order to convey how "the mechanical forces have not yet been generously and largely applied to make the physical world answer to the ideal . . ." (W, X, 69).⁴²

Utilizing the week-long voyage (actually a two-week excursion) as his primary vehicle for both artistic structure and philosophical reflection, Thoreau sets forth from Concord, "a port of entry and departure for the bodies as well as the souls of men" (W, I, 15). Almost at the outset, a fundamental and unavoidable sense of the conflict between the ideal and the actual arises. Thoreau and his

⁴¹ In his careful scrutiny of the machine and its effects upon both man and the landscape, Thoreau would seem to be rather far from the "static ecstasy" of "a trip to heaven without the tickets to limbo, purgatory, and hell" that Sherman Paul describes, Shores, p. 295.

⁴² Carl Hovde, "Nature into Art: Thoreau's Use of His Journals in A Week," American Literature, 30 (1958), 156-84 provides an informed study of the extent to which the young Thoreau reworked his materials for A Week, thus manifesting, relatively early in his career, a striving towards a careful craftsmanship. See also Hovde's "Literary Materials in Thoreau's A Week," PMLA, 80 (1965), 76-83 and, to some extent, Ernest E. Leisy, "Sources of Thoreau's Borrowings in A Week," American Literature, 18 (1946), 37-44 for information about how Thoreau made his wide range of borrowed material an integral part of his own conceptions.

brother glide smoothly, seeming "to be embarked on the placid currents of our dreams" (W, I, 21) and the author recalls an old man, a Walton-like figure for whom "fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world" (W, I, 28). However, in his ensuing meditations, Thoreau's tranquility is marred by the realization that Billerica's dam and canal, and Lowell's factories (he calls Lowell the "Manchester of America" W, I, 1067) have put an end to the migration of the Salmon, Shad, and Alewives. Thoreau's depiction of the struggle of the fish to mount the stream, even though indicative of his exaggerated youthful enthusiasm, reveals his crucial concern over the invasion of the river world by technology: "Armed with no sword, no electric shock, but mere Shad, armed only with innocence and a just cause, with tender dumb mouth only forward, and scales easy to be detached. I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Billerica dam? . . . Who hears the fishes when they cry?" (W, I, 44-45).

In a natural way, the rosy Edenic dawn, with its "heathenish integrity" (W, I, 53), continually vanishes with its dews, so that "not even the most 'persevering mortal' can preserve the memory of its freshness to midday" (W, I, 54).⁴³ Similarly--but quite unnaturally--the "ideal

⁴³ A perpetual theme of Thoreau's is the attempt to preserve the dews of dawn in the imaginative realm of his

remoteness and perfection" (W, I, 56) Thoreau experiences on the voyage, the reveries, the harmony in nature, are repeatedly shattered by the intrusions of commerce. The scream of a fishhawk scaring the fishes is replaced by the whistle of a steam-engine, calling the country to what is supposedly "progress" (W, I, 112); locks and dams destroy fisheries along the Merrimack (W, I, 113); Thoreau's Sunday-night sleep is disrupted by the "boisterous sport of some Irish laborers on the railroad, . . . still unwearied and unresting on this seventh day" (W, I, 148-49); the reflection of the brothers in solitude is briefly shattered by a canal-boat which glides by "like some huge river beast," followed by another and another, until "we found ourselves in the current of commerce once more" (W, I, 187); a boatman's horn, echoing across the river, disturbs "The current of our reflections and our slumbers" (W, I, 206); the mouth of the Nashua, formerly--and admirably--uninhabited, "now resounds with the din of a manufacturing town" (W, I, 211) and its falls and factories cannot tempt Thoreau to explore it (W, I, 211); fertile farms are converted into deserts by the sod-breaking railroads (W, I, 260); the railroads bring an end to the reign of the "sort of fabulous river-men" (W, I, 277) and foreshadow the end of all boating on the Merrimack (W, I, 279); the lumberers topple trees

thoughts. As he says in Walden: "To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning" (W, II, 141). Similar sentences can be found in nearly all of his writings.

and the sound reverberates through the woods "like the roar of artillery" (W, I, 303); canal drains have so reduced the volume of the river at Amoskeag that it no longer fills its bed (W, I, 325); "extremely artificial and luxurious modes of cultivation" have accounted for "the loss of many odiferous native plants, sweet-scented grasses and medicinal herbs, which formerly sweetened the atmosphere, and rendered it salubrious" (W, I, 468).

In the numerous instances of commerce disrupting the natural world, Thoreau perceives a fundamental cause for concern. All of the "progress," all of the advancements in production and machinery, seem to occur with no significant spiritual gain for mankind. It is almost as if man has become caught up in merely making machines and has justified the continuation of such commerce by providing the machines with their own raison d'être. "Think what a mean and wretched place this world is; that half the time we have to light a lamp that we may see to live in it. This is half our life. Who would undertake the enterprise if it were all?" (W, I, 86), Thoreau asks. Later, he says, "unless we do more than simply learn the trade of our time, we are but apprentices, and not yet masters of the art of life" (W, I, 161). All too often, men "make something to take the place of something," and then "behave as if it were the very thing they wanted" (W, I, 164-65).

However, while others become enchanted by the false attractions of mere production and unquestioned technological

change, Thoreau persists in his symbolic voyage down "life's stream," along which lie "the fountains of innocence and youth making fertile its sandy margin" (W, I, 252). Nature, since it is "habitable, genial, and propitious" (W, I, 140) to Thoreau, since it "produces anything ready for the use of man" (W, I, 337-38), is capable of performing a sense-purifying rite that is not only invigorating but also quite essential to Thoreau's total artistic temper. The primary place which the senses must occupy for the artist is clearly and vividly revealed by Thoreau in the final chapter of the Week:

We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery that its divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not see God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely? (W, I, 503-04)

Such powerful assertions (and they are indeed assertions, since the questions Thoreau raises here are merely rhetorical) are much more than an idealistic young man's parrotings of the Emersonian doctrines contained in Nature. They are the firmly felt beliefs which remained with Thoreau, in one form or another, throughout his artistic career: the seer of Walden refuses to "have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled" by the smoke and steam and hissing of the railroad

(W, II, 192); the later author of "Huckleberries" continues to sing the praises of a Nature which exists for man, a Nature which he finds synonymous with health.⁴⁴

After affirming the vital role of the senses, Thoreau goes one step further, contending that the true poet possesses no mere common sense, but rather what can be termed an "uncommon sense" (W, I, 511). In the Week's concluding pages, Thoreau defines this concept with a striking tone of assurance and an awareness of his own place in the exalted world of the poet. He begins with the Lockean idea of association through the senses: "I perceive in the common train of my thoughts a natural and uninterrupted sequence, each implying the next, or, if interruption occurs, it is occasioned by a new object being presented to my senses" (W, I, 509). Now, however, he describes a drastic transition that is virtually inexplicable, which leads to a vision that is far beyond the common: "But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called common-sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one, from seeing things as men describe them, to seeing them as men cannot describe them. This implies a sense which is not common,

⁴⁴ Thoreau's hitherto unpublished essay, "Huckleberries," which was reconstructed and edited by the late Professor Leo Stoller from the New York Public Library's Berg Collection manuscripts of "Notes on Fruits and Seeds," was read by Walter Harding at the annual meeting of the Thoreau Society on July 12, 1969, in Concord, Massachusetts. See Thoreau Society Bulletin, No. 108 (Summer 1969), p. 1.

but rare in the wisest man's experience; which is sensible or sentient of more than common" (W, I, 509-10).⁴⁵

Thoreau is restored and inspired by Nature's freshness and innocence; he sees and hears the "celestial" in the most apparently earthly objects. He admires the pure foaming and fuming, and the savage booming, of the canals beneath the Manchester Manufacturing Company; moreover, he delights in seeing a rainbow there, "though it came from under a factory" (W, I, 323). Pythagoras-like, he fixes his intellect "in the sublime symphonies of the world" and hears "the universal harmony and consonance of the spheres" (W, I, 229) as he listens to the vibrations of the telegraph (an invention which he wittily attacks in Walden). For the telegraph, transformed by Nature, becomes an instrument whose divine sounds are readily perceived by the keen "uncommon" senses of the artist. The telegraph, then, sends forth "a faint music in the air like an AEolian harp" (W, I, 230), a message seemingly sent by the gods. The music of the telegraph, Thoreau says, enraptured, hints "at the price of the world itself and of things which are priceless, of absolute truth and beauty" (W, I, 230). Others, caught up in the "currents of commerce," the good-for-nothings who "have a singular desire to be good without

⁴⁵ Significantly, Thoreau makes a similar pronouncement on the artist's "uncommon sense" in his posthumously published essay, "Walking": "It is not every truth that recommends itself to the common sense" (W, IX, 286).

being good for anything" (W, I, 93), the men who lead a starved hawk-like existence (W, I, 126), the "Monday-men" who prefer to pay their toll rather than to stem "the tide of travel" (W, I, 153) may eventually have need for doctors. But Thoreau, for whom the simple stray sounds of a tyro's drumming can be a means of relating him to the stars (W, I, 224-25), will require no such medical attention. Healed only by Nature, he can boast, "Heal yourselves, doctors; by God, I live" (W, I, 225).⁴⁶

There are kindred souls whom Thoreau celebrates for their vigor, virtue, and naturalness. The unnamed hunters and farmers are "rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, . . . greater than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got the time to say so" (W, I, 7); the two men on a skiff, who sail as naturally as birds fly and fishes swim, provide Thoreau with "a beautiful and successful experiment in natural philosophy," thereby ennobling the art of navigation (W, I, 60); the "serene and liberal-minded man" at the locks above Pawtucket Falls satisfies Thoreau's rigid demands for honest personal relationships by sharing "a just and equal encounter of the eyes, as between two honest men" (W, I, 100). Similarly, the "frank and hospitable young woman" at the mountain lodge is charmingly familiar to Thoreau as she stands before him "in a

⁴⁶ Such remarks assume an added poignance when one considers the actual state of poor health which plagued Thoreau during most of his life. See, for example, Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 13.

dishabille, busily and unconcernedly combing her long black hair while she talked," her eyes lively and sparkling (W, I, 237-38). Rice, the mountain-dweller, is "as rude as a fabled satyr" (W, I, 270), but Thoreau prefers him so and is "even pleased at the discovery of such a singular natural phenomenon" (W, I, 270). The boat-repairing carpenters perform a labor which, for Thoreau, is "as ancient and honorable an art as agriculture" and which makes possible a seagoing life that is of classical and even mythical proportions (as Thoreau will demonstrate with great care in Cape Cod⁴⁷) (W, I, 282-83). The Indians, often victimized by the white man when they stand in the way of his desires for territorial expansion or industrial development, are frequently described in heroic terms in the pages of A Week. Thoreau immortalizes them as beings who are "admitted from time to time to a rare and peculiar society with Nature" (W, I, 69) and who possess "glances of starry recognition" (W, I, 69).⁴⁸

None of the nature-loving individuals whom Thoreau idealizes are able to verbalize their position in the universe, or to express the significance of their simple

⁴⁷John J. McAleer discusses the heroic Cape Cod seamen in "Thoreau's Epic 'Cape Cod,'" Thought, 43 (1968), 227-46.

⁴⁸For a provocative analysis of Thoreau's treatment of the Indians in A Week, see Leslie A. Fiedler, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), pp. 104-20.

yet heroic type of existence.⁴⁹ What is more important, they ultimately vanish, having been seen by Thoreau in his period of "waking sleep" (W, I, 285) as "some flitting perspectives, and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature . . ." (W, I, 8). And, even more than the idealized visions of mortal men, Thoreau's transcendent supernatural glimpses of natural phenomena are short-lived: they belong to a symbolic timeless realm without bounds and therefore "outside to time, perennial, young, divine" (W, I, 8). As Thoreau realistically remarks, "the rainbow, however beautiful and unerring a sign, does not promise fair weather forever, but only for a season" (W, I, 373-74). Nor would Thoreau want an eternal rainbow. As early as six years before the publication of A Week he had confessed in his Journal of a desire to "contemplate the perfect steadily with the clear understanding that I do not attain to it."⁵⁰ Now, in an equally honest passage, he admits that the artist exaggerates his conception of Nature itself and, indeed, takes greater pleasure in the imagination's hazy picture of the natural world than in sharply defined Nature as it actually exists: "The most stupendous scenery ceases to be sublime when it becomes distinct, or in other words limited, and the imagination is no longer encouraged to

⁴⁹ As Thoreau puts it in "Walking," "the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men" (W, IX, 275).

⁵⁰ Blanding, "The Text of Thoreau's Fragmentary Journals," p. 42; also Bode, ed., Selected Journals, p. 73.

exaggerate it. . . . Nature is not made after such a fashion as we would have her. We piously exaggerate her wonders as the scenery around our home" (W, I, 251).

Since Thoreau delights in his fascinating quest for the evanescent ideal, he refuses to despair when he discerns that the village beyond the rainbow at the Manchester Manufacturing Company's canal is marked by the hammer-sounds that are "laying the foundation of another Lowell on the banks" (W, I, 323). So, also, he persists in his noble pursuit even when the physically and spiritually exhilarating experience of hearing the music of the telegraph is ended by the more immediate concerns of the voyage. Yet there is at least one instance, when he is reminiscing about a mountain-climbing venture as he views the hazy Nashua Valley, in which Thoreau fears the eventual termination of all visions of the ideal: "At length, like Rasselas and other inhabitants of happy valleys, we had resolved to scale the blue wall which bounded the western horizon, though not without misgivings that thereafter no visible fairy-land would exist for us" (W, I, 215).

Like Keats in his encounter with the nightingale, Thoreau is caught in a moment of "waking sleep," and is torn between the timeless attractions of the ideal and the human encumbrances of day-to-day existence. He faces the dilemma of whether "to float upon the inappreciable tides of nature" (W, I, 284), his life like a sail bending to the impulses of a breeze (W, I, 475), or to keep a stiff

fin, like the tenacious Horned Pout, stemming all the tides of adversity (W, I, 45). As a mere mortal, such as those mortal farmers and fishermen, boatmen and Indians he praises, he will inevitably suffer the fate of the aspirant man who, "feeding on air, divided against himself, cannot stand, but pines and dies after a life of sickness, on beds of down" (W, I, 43). However, as a true poet, a comrade of deities, he will be able to achieve immortality.

Ultimately, then, it is only the consummate artist, the true poet, the Genius (into whose company Thoreau admits himself) who is able to describe the experiences which constitute a vision of the ideal. "The bird of paradise is obliged constantly to fly against the wind, lest its gay trappings, pressing close to its body, impede its free movements" (W, I, 448), Thoreau asserts, indicating the difficulties (not altogether unwelcome) that beset the poet. At the end of A Week, after having encountered the turbulent winds of technology, Thoreau--as an artist--decides upon his true vocation and retains his sanity and his cherished relationship with the gods. The pencil-maker's solution to the technological dilemma is a completely artistic gesture, a symbolic affirmation of the primacy of the world of the mind. Foreshadowing A Week and Walden, Thoreau had asked in "Paradise (to be) Regained," "are those [inventions] of no account which are patented by fancy and imagination, and succeed so admirably in our dreams that they give the tone still to our waking

thoughts?" (W, X, 65-66). His answer, in A Week, is an assertion of the inventive powers of the imagination, which permits man to trudge the "Concord mud" (W, I, 518) of commercial preoccupation in the actual world, but to soar above this, like a bird of paradise, to a limitless and incorruptible real or ideal world: "These continents and hemispheres are soon run over, but an always unexplored and infinite region makes off on every side from the mind, further than to sunset, and we can make no highway or beaten track into it, but the grass immediately springs up in the path, for we travel there chiefly with our wings" (W, I, 473).

Thoreau's "uncommon sense" (W, I, 511), by which he perceives "the interval between that which appears, and that which is" (W, I, 510), permits him, for however brief a time, to mingle with the stars, which "chiefly answer to the ideal in man" (W, I, 515). But his life-long task of searching for the elusive "bottomless skylight" in the bog of his life (W, I, 225) and for the evanescent "dazzling halls of Aurora, into which poets have had but a partial glance over the eastern hills" (W, I, 246-47) cannot be accomplished so easily. He must, as Jonathan Bishop observes, more fully experiment in the experience of nature to justify the "expression of faith" with which he terminates A Week.⁵¹ His exploration of the natural world, the

⁵¹ Bishop, pp. 90-91.

"strategic metaphor" for self-exploration, must be extended and enlarged. In his "hope of literally experiencing what seems as yet hidden and unexplained," Thoreau faces the artistic necessity of approaching a "definition of the limits of knowledge, admission of ignorance and the unknown," as William Drake asserts.⁵² Thus, it will take further encounters with man and his machines, and further tests of the supremacy of his symbolizing, to determine the effectiveness of his resolution. Walden will mark the continuation of the flight of the bird of paradise--against the wind.

⁵² Drake, "A Week," p. 70.

CHAPTER III

HARVESTING THE LOSSES

The constant warfare in each heart is betwixt Reason and Commodity. The victory is won as soon as any Soul has learned always to take sides with Reason against himself; to transfer his Me from his person, his name, his interest, back upon Truth and Justice, so that when he is disgraced and defeated and fretted and disheartened, and wasted by nothings, he bears it well, never one instant relaxing his watchfulness, and, as soon as he can get a respite from the insults or the sadness, records all these phenomena, and, like a God, oversees himself. Thus he harvests his losses, and turns the dust of his shoes to gems.
-Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind.
-Henry David Thoreau, Walden

I

The interval between the publication of A Week and that of Walden was a particularly trying one for Thoreau.

Shaken by the lack of success of A Week¹ and suffering from a deteriorating friendship with Emerson,² he found it necessary to hire himself out as a surveyor and to seek lecture engagements whenever he could. While surveying allowed him to remain close to nature, it nevertheless fostered within him a feeling of being somehow degraded. Consider an especially telling Journal entry for September 30, 1851, written after surveying the town boundaries with the Concord Selectmen:

As I go through the fields, endeavoring to recover my tone and sanity and to perceive things truly and simply again, after having been perambulating the bounds of the town all the week, and dealing with the most commonplace and worldly-minded men, and emphatically trivial things, I feel as if I had committed suicide in a sense. I am again forcibly struck with the truth of the fable of Apollo serving King Admetus, its universal applicability. A fatal coarseness is the result of mixing in the trivial affairs of men. Though I have been associating even with the select men of this and the surrounding towns, I feel inexpressibly begrimed. My Pegasus has lost his wings; he has turned a reptile and gone on his belly. Such things are compatible only with a cheap and superficial life. (DJ, III, 5)

Gradually in this period, Thoreau's dealings with nature became more and more scientific. Rather than poetizing over nature, he collected and classified botanical

¹ Thoreau, in an admirable attempt to cover up his dismay at the failure of A Week, wrote in his Journal for October 28, 1853: "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself" (DJ, V, 459). As Harding points out, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 53, Munroe, his publisher had sold only 218 copies in four years and shipped the remainder to Thoreau "to clear the shelves."

² See, for example, Harding, Days, pp. 298-304. The most detailed and thorough treatment of the Emerson-Thoreau relationship at present is Joel Porte, Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1966).

specimens.³ Just barely turned thirty-four, he bewails, in the pages of his Journal, the loss of youth, innocence, and the perceptions of the senses. In his anguish he is Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh come to Concord to lament the loss of the natural bliss expressed in the "Idyllic" chapter of Sartor Resartus. It seems hardly possible that such words as those that follow could have come from the man who had spent two glorious years at Walden Pond and who was in the process of transforming his experience into an enduring work of art: "Methinks my present experience is nothing; my past experience is all in all. I think that no experience which I have to-day comes up to, or is comparable with, the experience of my boyhood. . . . Formerly, methought, nature developed as I developed, and grew up with me. My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited by body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains" (DJ, II, 306-07).⁴

Equally incredible are Thoreau's Journal remarks for the early months of 1853, the year before Walden, his masterpiece of transcendental affirmation, was published.

³ Harding, Days, p. 290.

⁴ Portions of the passage are also quoted by Canby, Thoreau, p. 317.

Here, as Walter Harding perceives, "For the first and only time in his life he [Thoreau] seems to have lost his faith in man and turned to nature not to fulfill his life but to escape from it."⁵ Representative of Thoreau's somewhat sudden state of malaise is this Journal passage of January 3, 1853: "I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her . . . What he touches he taints" (DJ, IV, 445).⁶ In his state of inner turmoil, he is unable to escape even from himself. He confesses in his Journal on January 21, 1853, "As I walk the railroad causeway I am, as the last two months, disturbed by the sound of my steps on the frozen ground. I wish to hear the silence of the night, for the silence is something positive and to be heard. I cannot walk with my ears covered" (DJ, IV, 471). A few lines later he adds, "Yesterday I was influenced with the rottenness of human relations. They appeared full of death and decay, and offended the nostrils" (DJ, IV, 472).⁷

J. Lyndon Shanley says Thoreau's gloomy utterances of this interval are but "occasional moods"⁸; Henry Seidel

⁵ Harding, Days, p. 329.

⁶ The passage is also quoted by Harding in Days, p. 329.

⁷ The passage is also quoted by Harding in Days, p. 329.

⁸ The Making of Walden: with the Text of the First Version (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 7-8.

Canby says they are nothing more than the natural reaction of a man approaching middle age.⁹ Surely "technology" cannot be given the total blame for casting Thoreau into such a pervasive state of despondency. Yet it must be admitted that, to a certain extent, such activities as surveying and even lecturing did impose upon Thoreau a moral dilemma of sorts. For his surveying efforts were partially responsible for the eventual destruction of numerous acres of forest¹⁰ and, as has already been indicated, such work did permit him to observe (through his first-hand dealings with farmers and politicians) the narrowness and mediocrity of his neighbors. "All I find," he is quoted as saying by Walter Harding, "is old bound-marks, and the slowness and dullness of farmers reconfirmed."¹¹ Likewise, after various of his lectures were poorly received, Thoreau condemned his audiences for being callous and unthoughtful. After Walden was published, he reported bitterly in his Journal on December 6, 1854, for example: "After lecturing twice this winter I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer, i.e., to

⁹ Canby, p. 317.

¹⁰ See, however, Leo Stoller, After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 76 for this qualification: "The significance of Thoreau's silvical investigations is that they led to a reconciliation of these contradictory strains in his attitude to the forest. His discovery of the mechanism of succession pointed to a system of forest management which would yield lumber and profit to satisfy man's grosser instincts and at the same time preserve nature for the disciplining of his spirit."

¹¹ Days, p. 325.

interest my audience. . . . I fail to get even the attention of the mass. I should suit them better if I suited myself less. I feel that the public demand an average man,--average thoughts and manners,--not originality, nor even absolute excellence" (DJ, IV, 79).¹²

It goes without saying, of course, that much of Thoreau's lamentation over his hectic existence as a frustrated Apollo is sheer poetic license--or, in other words, contrived exaggeration. It is a literary posture that is, as Leon Edel states, the mark of a man who possesses "an inner rage that consumes."¹³ Yet Perry Miller is perhaps closer to the mark when he speaks of Thoreau's highly serious "search for disengagement"¹⁴--disengagement from the shackles of a materialistic way of life. As Miller

¹² It is interesting and informative to note that, even in "Life Without Principle," one of Thoreau's last works, there is a vigorous rejection of those lecture audiences which encourage superficiality. In that essay, Thoreau will attack such individuals even more harshly than he does in the Journal passage: "If you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. . . . You are paid for being something less than a man" (W, X, 257-58). The passage is also quoted by McAleer, "Therapeutic Vituperations," p. 81.

¹³ Edel, p. 8. Edel considers Thoreau's life to be one of perpetual melancholy (cf. pp. 8, 35, 39). He asserts that Thoreau's real reason for going to Walden was to act with "the petulance of the child saying, in effect, to the town and to Emerson 'see how homeless I am, you have forced me to live in a shanty away from all of you'" (p. 21). Such a gesture, Edel feels, was calculated to arouse both pity and interest (p. 21).

¹⁴ Consciousness in Concord, p. 76.

puts it, "The delicate, the fragile, faculty for consciously savoring life--for living deliberately--could not for a moment be dulled by the slightest rasping upon it of any trade or profession."¹⁵ Although Miller grows tired of Thoreau's repeated descriptions of the Apollo-Admetus conflict, calling it "the worn-out fable,"¹⁶ he hints at Thoreau's widespread usage of the fable to explain his predicament. It appears that Thoreau experienced a virtual obsession insofar as a justification of his literary career was concerned.

Interestingly enough, Thoreau, in a lengthy letter to H. G. O. Blake, dated February 27, 1853, presents an extended "sermon" on the conflict between "getting a living" and saving one's soul. Although Thoreau begs Blake, in a postscript, to "Excuse this rather flippant preaching" (Corr., p. 300), there is very little flippancy in the sober document. Indeed, the letter might very well be taken as Thoreau's personal appeal for sympathy and understanding, for recognition of the value of his peculiar way of life. For, as Walter Harding points out, Blake was Thoreau's "first major disciple," a man who "must have done much to sustain and encourage Thoreau through those long years when little other concrete evidence of fame

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

came to him."¹⁷ Just as Thoreau, in Walden, calls upon high-minded men of future generations to accept his words as "significant and fragrant" (W, II, 500-01), here he is, whether consciously or not, seeking the same justification for his rejection of a technological world, a world obsessed by the pursuit of material benefits.

Thoreau begins with a cheerless comment about his surveying: "I have not answered your letter before because I have been almost constantly in the fields surveying of late. It is long since I have spent so many days so profitably in a pecuniary sense; so unprofitably, it seems to me, in a more important sense" (Corr., p. 295). Then, referring to the recent Western expansion of the railroads due to government grants (Corr., p. 292) he continues, in language that reflects his criticism of the "Iron Horse" in Walden: "The whole enterprise of this nation which is not an upward, but a westward one, toward Oregon California, Japan & c is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific railroad. . . . No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny which I trust is not mine. . . . I would rather be a captive knight, and let them all pass by, than be free only to go whither they are bound. What ends do they propose to themselves beyond Japan? What aims more lofty have they than the prairie dogs?" (Corr., p. 296).

¹⁷ Days, pp. 231, 233.

Crucial to any understanding of Thoreau's condemnations of technology (as described here in terms of surveying and in racing needlessly across the country in a railroad) is an awareness--as he himself was keenly aware--of his chosen vocation as a man of letters. As the following passage from his letter indicates (albeit somewhat diffusely), he equates his career with a spiritual quest and professes his fidelity to that quest. There is, in such a lofty pursuit, no place for giving in to the dangerous distractions of the trivialities of life:

As it respects these things I have not changed an opinion one iota from the first. As the stars looked to me when I was a shepherd in Assyria, they look to me now a New Englander. The higher the mt. on which you stand, the less the change in the prospect from year to year, from age to age. . . . I have had but one spiritual birth (excuse the word,) and now whether it rains or snows, whether I laugh or cry, fall farther below or approach nearer to my standard, whether Pierce or Scott is elected, --not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising & everlastingly new light dawns to me, with only such variations as in the coming of the natural day, with which indeed, it is often coincident. (Corr., pp. 296-97)

This is why, as Thoreau so bluntly puts it, "I very rarely indeed, if ever 'feel any itching to be what is called useful to my fellowmen'" (Corr., p. 297). Men are too preoccupied, he says, again anticipating the pages of Walden, with satisfying their bodily hunger and thirst; they are remiss, however, in doing the same for their souls: "An ordinary man will work each day for a year at shovelling dirt to support his body, or a family of bodies,

but he is an extraordinary man who will work a whole day in a year for the support of his soul" (Corr., p. 298).¹⁸

II

On July 4 of the following year (the ninth anniversary of the day on which he began his two-year sojourn at Walden Pond), Thoreau lectured at the Anti-Slavery Convention in Framingham, Massachusetts. His lecture, "Slavery in Massachusetts," a "protest against the arrest of the Negro Anthony Burns in Boston and his return to slavery in Virginia,"¹⁹ was published by William Lloyd Garrison in his July 21 number of the Liberator. "Slavery in Massachusetts," like "Civil Disobedience," is a heartfelt condemnation of a particular political and social ill. Yet "Slavery in Massachusetts," like its predecessor, is much more. In the words of Walter Harding, "it is a timeless and universal appeal for a higher standard of morality," a work which "is as timely today as the day it was written."²⁰ Thoreau had urged, in A Yankee in

¹⁸ As Harding, Days, p. 342 points out, Thoreau composed a lecture on the subject, which he variously called "Getting a Living" or "What Shall it Profit a Man if He Gain The Whole World But Lose His Own Soul?" The lecture was repeated several times and was eventually published after Thoreau's death under the title, "Life without Principle."

¹⁹ Harding, "Introduction" to Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers, p. ix.

²⁰ A Thoreau Handbook, p. 60.

Canada, "Give me a country where it is the most natural thing in the world for a government that does not understand you to let you alone" (W, IX, 103). Not finding such a government in Canada, he returned to Concord, only to reflect (as his letter to Blake reveals) upon the mercenary and mechanical quality of American life. Now, writing in the white-heat of his poetic fury (Joseph Wood Krutch refers to "Slavery in Massachusetts" as "pure indignation"²¹), he lashes out at the American government which, rather than leaving him free to write, had threatened his spiritual progress and "fatally interfered with my lawful business" (W, X, 194). Thoreau, accused by some critics of leading a cold, emotionless life in an "ivory tower,"²² does quite the opposite in the pages of "Slavery in Massachusetts."

At the beginning of his address, Thoreau chides his fellow citizens for permitting themselves, in a sense, to be enslaved by their refusal to reject the Fugitive Slave Law: "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts" (W, X, 171-72). A few pages later, he becomes even more devastating in

²¹ Henry David Thoreau (1948; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), p. 234.

²² Edel, for one, says, "In a society of diminishing liberties, Thoreau freed himself personally of some of society's tyrannies without offering any ultimate solution for the problems he so fervently discussed" (p. 10). A fuller discussion of the matter of Thoreau's alleged selfishness will be found in Chapter IV.

his attack on the townspeople of Concord, those who commemorate the battle of Concord Bridge on the one hand and yet blindly condone slavery on the other: "Nowadays, men wear a fool's-cap, and call it a liberty-cap. I do not know but there are some, who, if they were tied to a whipping-post, and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannons to celebrate their liberty" (W, X, 177).

Not just the Concord residents, but the Governor of Massachusetts, and even the Congress itself, come under the strident attack of Thoreau. The Governor, he says, is spineless and afraid to resist blatant injustice. As such a weak-willed individual, the state's "executive officer" arouses no admiration from Thoreau: ". . . if to be a Governor requires to subject one's self to so much ignominy without remedy, if it is to put a restraint upon my manhood, I shall take care never to be Governor of Massachusetts" (W, X, 175). Similarly, the Congress, that body which would dare to enact the Fugitive Slave Law, is as mindless a group as Thoreau could imagine:

If I were seriously to propose to Congress to make mankind into sausages, I have no doubt that most of the members would smile at my proposition, and if any believed me to be in earnest, they would think that I proposed something much worse than Congress had ever done. But if any of them will tell me that to make a man into a sausage would be much worse,--would be any worse,--than to make him into a slave,--than it was to enact the Fugitive Slave Law,--I will accuse him of foolishness, of intellectual incapacity, of making a distinction without a difference. The one is just as sensible a proposition as the other. (W, X, 179)

Those who merit Thoreau's censure do so because they fail to regard the individual as superior to any state. Such a notion, expressed in "Civil Disobedience," is repeated even more emphatically in "Slavery." "I wish my countrymen to consider," Thoreau suggests, "that whatever the human law may be, neither an individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscurest individual, without having to pay the penalty for it" (W, X, 178). "The law," he boldly proclaims, "will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it" (W, X, 181). He sets up a distinction between the truth and the law, and places the former in the more significant position: "Whoever can discern truth has received his commission from a higher source than the chiefest justice in the world who can discern only law" (W, X, 181-82).

The central conflict is one of expediency against integrity. The citizens who read only the slave-supporting and "still eminently time-serving" newspapers "are in the condition of the dog that returns to his vomit" (W, X, 184-85), Thoreau says in his "fierce philippic against the hireling journals"²³ and their audiences; the soldier who returns runaway slaves is simply "a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat" (W, X, 177). The majority of Americans,

²³ Salt, p. 160.

those who do nothing "while their brothers and sisters are being scourged and hung for loving liberty" (W, X, 186) are, Thoreau says, understating the case greatly, "not men of principle" (W, X, 186). Rather than a worthy concern with the rights of the individual, "it is the mismanagement of wood and iron and stone and gold which concerns them" (W, X, 186). The judges who refuse to listen to their consciences are, like "the marine who discharges his musket in any direction he is ordered to" (W, X, 188), "just as much tools, and as little men" (W, X, 188).

Realizing the urgency of the situation and the extent to which society is tainted by the slime of blind servitude of one sort of another, Thoreau makes a vehemently eloquent appeal for self-respect: "I would remind my countrymen that they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour" (W, X, 187); "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity,--who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority. The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls,--the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning" (W, X, 190); "It is not an era of repose. We have used up all our inherited freedom. If we would save our lives, we must fight for them" (W, X, 194).

Yet as drastically as Thoreau describes the unheroic state of affairs predominant in the country, he refuses to submit to a condition of total despair. He concludes "Slavery in Massachusetts" with a vivid sense of renewal, of the spiritual rebirth of the individual. Appropriately enough, the natural imagery that conveys his final spirit of hope is similar to that at the end of both A Week and Walden. The self-appointed Apollo had undergone an anguished period "with the sense of having suffered a vast and indefinite loss" (W, X, 192). The corruption of the human race--here typified in the cowardly toleration of human enslavement--had made it virtually impossible for the poet to be at peace with either himself or the world of nature. And Thoreau, in his bitterness, could have killed the state for souring his relationship with nature: "I walk toward one of our ponds; but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them; when we are not serene, we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her" (W, X, 195).

Fortunately, after scenting a white water-lily, Thoreau finds his senses sharpened again, "and a season I had waited for had arrived" (W, X, 195). For the water-lily, humble though it may be, becomes to Thoreau "the

emblem of purity" (W, X, 195). In A Yankee in Canada, he had exulted, "Inexpressibly beautiful appears the recognition by man of the least natural fact, and the allying his life to it" (W, IX, 24). Now, utilizing the lily, he clutches to it with his very consciousness, allying his life to a simple flower for the sake of his peace of mind. Rather than permitting the moral corruption of his contemporaries to destroy the beauties he saw in nature, Thoreau focuses on nature as the symbol of his hope for man's moral betterment. In his allegory in miniature, as he explains it, "The foul slime stands for the sloth and vice of man, the decay of humanity; the fragrant flower that springs from it, for the purity and courage which are immortal" (W, X, 196). The conclusion of "Slavery" is nearly as bright a one as that of Walden, with its glowing celebration of the dawning of a new day in the human imagination:

It [the water-lily] bursts up so pure and fair to the eye, and so sweet to the scent, as if to show us what purity and sweetness reside in, and can be extracted from, the slime and muck of earth. . . . What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not so soon despair of the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man's deeds will smell as sweet. (W, X, 195)

Thus, in place of the "foul slime" and "manure" of ignoble human pursuits, Thoreau, as John J. McAleer observes, "offers lilies."²⁴

²⁴ "Therapeutic Vituperations," p. 84.

III

With his renewed faith in the perfectibility of the human spirit, Thoreau was assured of the importance of his existence as an artist. A man of intense emotional sensibilities (Perry Miller has stated that he, in all of American literature, most perfectly merits Thomas Mann's characterization of "a delicate child of life"),²⁵ he had been deeply disturbed by the derogatory comments of those who viewed his early literary life as a useless enterprise. But, at twenty-eight, as a Harvard graduate, he boldly refused to succumb to their verbal assaults. Instead, because of his total commitment to the artistic life, he became a self-willed outcast by his excursion at Walden Pond. He went to Walden not to hide from criticism, but "to create a mythology out of the village Apollo, Henry Thoreau."²⁶ The Walden experiment in essence had been a self-devised test of the validity of such a myth-making. Thoreau had gone to Walden (at a time when he felt that the society of Concord was moving with a damnable swiftness towards completely materialistic goals) in order to dramatize the dilemma of the artist in the machine-age.

²⁵ "Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism," New England Quarterly, 34 (1961), 152.

²⁶ Miller, Consciousness in Concord, p. 25. Although Miller's remarks are made in reference to Thoreau's Journal, they certainly apply equally to Walden.

If the intervening years between Walden and the publication of Walden had their share of discouragement--as indeed they did--they nevertheless helped to reconfirm Thoreau's enduring belief in the rightness of Apollo and the wrongness of an Admetus-like technology. Thoreau conceived Walden, as J. Lyndon Shanley so astutely perceives, not only as "the story of the experience which settled his life for him" but also as "a statement of his beliefs which had flourished under the test of time."²⁷ As Shanley points out, the convictions which Thoreau revealed in Walden had been held firmly for a long time, even in those trying years after he had left the pond and seen his first published book become a veritable disaster. Shanley asserts: "That his beliefs did stand firm and that Walden expressed his thoughts and feelings at the time he published it is quite clear from his constant and extensive work on it from 1851 to 1854."²⁸

One of the chief intentions of Thoreau, in writing Walden, even from the very first, was to criticize the shabbiness of contemporary life through a comparison with his own. In part, Walden is an outgrowth of a lecture "on the mean and sneaking lives led by many people in Concord and New England."²⁹ Thoreau never deviated from

²⁷ Shanley, p. 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

his effort to amplify this criticism of society, a society he felt to be composed of machine-like nonentities with no apparent purpose than the making of money. For, while Thoreau made "six sets of additions, cancellations, and revisions" of Walden between 1848 and 1854 (he wrote the first version in 1846-47), "the essential nature of Walden did not change from first to last."³⁰ And, as Shanley illustrates in The Making of Walden, Thoreau "added considerably to the criticism of his contemporaries' desires" and ways of fulfilling them . . . , "particularly in the years between 1851 and 1854."³¹ One of the things which sustained Thoreau, then, in the crucial period between A Week and Walden, was his contention that his artistic vocation, his myth-making, his symbolic struggle of the self against society, his crowing as Chanticleer (for all of these are synonymous) was superior to the prosaic careers of conformity which he neighbors, "the mass of men," were pursuing so mechanically.

There is, of course, an element of irony present in Thoreau's struggle as it is presented in Walden: by voluntarily isolating himself from civilization (the isolation

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 4, 6.

³¹ Ibid., p. 58. Rather than show how Thoreau revised individual attacks against materialism as he reworked the text of Walden, as Shanley does (see, for example, pp. 26, 39, 45, 54, 58, 95), I shall, in this section of my discussion, deal with Thoreau's treatment of technology as revealed in the finished version of Walden.

was admittedly not a total one), by shunning its machines and materialism, he was compelled nevertheless, in his sojourn at Walden Pond, to confront the dominant symbol of the rising technology--the railroad. However, Thoreau's confrontation with the railroad provided him with a natural, powerful, first-hand look at progress incarnate. Significantly, the railroad also gave him a vital symbol with which to portray the conflict within the individual consciousness between the forces of past and present, tradition and progress, solitude and society, the wilderness and the machine.³²

In Walden, Thoreau expresses a fundamental dichotomy in his attitude toward the railroad (as I shall show in detail later), an ambivalence which fluctuates between out-and-out admiration and downright condemnation.³³ That this is so is a tribute to his impartiality as an observer-in-nature, his fidelity to his intention to become the

³² Thoreau, in dealing with the crisis of consciousness within the self, utilizes the "I" as the crucial focal-point of Walden. Whether the "I" is the actual Thoreau who lived at Walden (as recollected in tranquility and so described during the composition of the book) and nothing more, or Thoreau's fictive creation which symbolizes an ideal self, or the two sides of Thoreau's doubleness as player and spectator in the drama of life, is a matter which leaves much room for debate. In any case, whether we read Walden as Thoreau's spiritual autobiography or as his grand fiction, we should realize that the issues he raises and resolves (or attempts to resolve) with regard to the railroad are, without a doubt, those which he considered to be the fundamental ones facing mankind.

³³ This portion of Chapter III, dealing with Walden (and especially the chapter on "Sounds") is based upon my brief essay, "Thoreau's Inevitable, Infernal Railroad," in The Atlantic 1967/1968 Contests for College Students (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Co., 1968), pp. 42-43.

monarch of all he surveys (W, II, 130), to "stand right fronting and face to face to a fact" (W, II, 154), to read his fate, see what is before him, and walk on into futurity (W, II, 174). Thoreau makes it quite clear, in the opening paragraphs of the chapter in Walden entitled "Economy," that he is putting the materialistic way of life to a thorough transcendental test: "I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not" (W, II, 9). A few pages later he states: "No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof" (W, II, 16). Thus, with Walden as his laboratory, he examines the railroad (and all that it represents) with the mind of a tough, "hard-headed empiricist," as Leo Marx says.³⁴ Thoreau demonstrates, as Marx indicates, a craving for reality as well as a "distinctly firm, cross-grained texture" in which the dominant tone of affirmation is coupled with a skeptical undertone. This, Marx observes, places Walden "among the first in a long series of American books which, taken together, have had the effect of circumscribing the pastoral hope, much as Virgil circumscribes

³⁴ Machine in the Garden, p. 243.

it in his eclogues."³⁵

It is important to note that the railroad, for Thoreau, was not merely an artificially contrived symbol of an encroaching industrialism but was rather, as G. Ferris Cronkhite illustrates, genuinely woven into the fabric of his creative thought.³⁶ Or, as F. O. Matthiessen puts it: ". . . when, as a writer, he [Thoreau] could fuse his thought and his observation by means of a symbol, which was not just suggested but designed in sharp detail, he was able, in Coleridge's phrase, to 'elicit truth as at a flash.'"³⁷ Of course, Thoreau's ability to transmit his flashes of truth was greatly facilitated by the overwhelming acceptance of the railroad by the vast majority of Americans in the 1840's and 1850's and by their familiarity with it.

Leo Marx, in his shrewd assessment of Thoreau's contemplation of the railroad in Walden, points up the fundamental way in which Thoreau's symbolic approach resembles that of Carlyle (who had long before taught Thoreau the evils of industrialism):

Like Carlyle, Thoreau uses technological imagery to represent more than industrialism in the narrow, economic sense. It accompanies a mode of perception, an emergent system of meaning and value--a culture. In fact his overdrawn indictment of the Concord "economy" might have been written to document Carlyle's dark view of industrialism. Thoreau feels no simple-minded Luddite hostility toward the new

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 243-44.

³⁶ Cronkhite, p. 328.

³⁷ Matthiessen, p. 93.

inventions. . . . What he is attacking is the popular illusion that improving the means is enough, that if the machinery of society is put in good order (as Carlyle had said) "all were well with us; the rest would take care for itself!" He is contending against a culture pervaded by the mechanistic outlook. It may well be conducive to material progress, but it also engenders deadly fatalism and despair.³⁸

Thoreau, born "in the nick of time" (DJ, IX, 160), seeks "to improve the nick of time" (W, II, 29) by confronting the appearance of the new industrial boom in a wilderness that, while only a short distance from Concord village, is a symbolic representation of the pastoral life.³⁹ As Lewis Mumford says, Thoreau sets himself up in defiance of the new technology merely by existing as a writer. By pursuing "a life lived for its own values, instead of a life on the make," he utilizes the Walden woods and waters, with their corresponding connotation of wildness and the West, to provide the setting for his struggle for self-respect, integrity, or what Leo Stoller terms "the ideal of self-culture," the doctrine of simplicity.⁴⁰

³⁸ Machine in the Garden, pp. 247-48. Krutch refers to at least one of Thoreau's attacks on industrialism in Walden as "Carlylesque" (p. 259). Harding, in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, p. 263, n. 61 points out the resemblance between Thoreau's comments on clothes in "Economy" and the "clothes philosophy" contained in Carlyle's Sartor Resartus.

³⁹ Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 204; Marx, Machine in the Garden, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Mumford, Technics, pp. 204-05; Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950; rpt. New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), pp. 77-78; Leo Stoller, "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," New England Quarterly, 29 (1956), 443-44.

Or, as William Drake has stated the case so appropriately, Thoreau, in Walden, "calls for us to enter a new stage of conscious development, to act deliberately in problems we have hitherto tried to settle blunderingly."⁴¹ Part of such an attempt requires "the courage to lose ourselves deliberately" and "investigate the state of our ignorance."⁴² Thoreau, in Walden, welcomes such a task.

Walden begins with a repudiation of the past, and of a way of life that plows the better part of the villagers into the soil for compost (W, II, 11) or drives them to "lives of quiet desperation" (W, II, 15). The villagers, Thoreau says, "By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, . . . are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (W, II, 11). Hence, the laboring man "has no time to be anything but a machine" (W, II, 12). Thoreau, on the other hand, makes his own fate: "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (W, II, 15). In so doing, man is able to see "what are the true necessities and means of life" (W, II, 15). Appropriately enough, Thoreau's first reference to the railroad is in support of his rejection

⁴¹ "Walden," from "A Formal Study of H. D. Thoreau," Thesis. Univ. of Iowa 1948, rpt. in Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 74.

⁴² Ibid.

of the past. "Old people," he says sardonically, "did not know enough once, perchance, to fetch fresh fuel to keep the fire a-going; new people put a little dry wood under a pot, and are whirled round the globe with the speed of birds, in a way to kill old people, as the phrase is" (W, II, 16).

It is obvious even in the earliest pages of Walden, that Thoreau projects the image of a world-weary (and world-wary) seer whose examination of the exterior landscape of Walden (and, hence, symbolically of the interior landscape of his own mind) will be marked by an unmistakable transcendental skepticism--that is, by a refusal to force Nature to reveal only those "truths" that are easy to accept. Emerson had urged, in a Journal entry not long after his clarion "American Scholar" address, "Be a football to time and chance, the more kicks, the better, so that you inspect the whole game and know its uttermost law."⁴³ Thoreau states in Walden: "I delight to come to my bearings, --not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may,--not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by" (W, II, 508). The key to Thoreau's study of the railroad, and of everything else he observes at Walden, is this thoughtful contemplation

⁴³ Selections, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, p. 81.

in solitude, described by F. O. Matthiessen as Thoreau's attitude of indirection toward nature, his practice of avoiding the dangers of a too-exact habit of observation. Matthiessen says such indirection is not unlike Keats's delight in "the sidelong glance," his feeling that the ripest intuitions come through indolence.⁴⁴

Equipped as he is with his finely tuned senses, his natural setting, and his ever-present sense of urgency, Thoreau comes to see in the railroad (and, similarly, in the telegraph, and the log-cutting and ice-cutting operations at the pond) striking manifestations of both the good and evil possibilities of progress.⁴⁵ In "Economy" he recalls seeing a tool-box used by the railroad workers:

Formerly, when how to get my living honestly, with freedom left for my proper pursuits, was a question which vexed me even more than it does now, for unfortunately I am become somewhat callous, I used to see a large box by the railroad, six feet long by three wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at night; and it suggested to me that every man who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free. (W, II, 47-48)

The tool-box is of twofold symbolic significance to Thoreau: first, it contains the instruments by which the railroad will continue to grow, further engulfing the wilderness;

⁴⁴ Matthiessen, p. 90.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the "rape of the Walden ice" by the ice harvesters employed by Frederic Tudor, see Lewis P. Simpson, "Boston Ice and Letters in the Age of Jefferson," Midcontinent American Studies Journal, 9 (1968), 58-76.

and second, even though the tools insure the spread of the railroad, the box symbolizes to Thoreau the possibility of freedom of soul that he so desperately desires. In his symbolic vision of the tool-box, Thoreau is as serious as he is anywhere in Walden. Only a few sentences later he adds a sobering thought for those who would laugh at his exaggeration and then ignore it: "Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this. I am far from jesting" (W, II, 48). It is interesting to note that the very boards which Thoreau had used to build his hut were formerly the shanty of James Collins, one of the Irishmen on the Fitchburg Railroad crew. Here, although in an indirect way (and coupled with the fact that Thoreau spread the boards on the grass at Walden "to bleach and warp back again in the sun" W, II, 717--a practical action, yet one that is suggestive of Thoreau's own efforts at self-purification), the railroad is again associated with one of Thoreau's most crucial symbols, the hut which, according to Sherman Paul, signifies the self for Thoreau and contains his vital heat. It is the place where he comes "to meet the developing seasons of man and consciousness."⁴⁶

Now, however, it is time for Thoreau to begin his assault on the detrimental aspects of the railroad. In

⁴⁶ "Introduction" to Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. xxix.

the following passage, he vividly contrasts the glorious "last improvement of civilization," the railroad, with the wretched shanties of those whose very lives are devoted to bringing the railroad to its commanding place in the nineteenth-century universe. His grim words require no explanation; the irony of the situation is immediately evident.

It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages. I refer to the degraded poor, not now to the degraded rich. To know this I should not need to look farther than the shanties which everywhere border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked. It certainly is fair to look at that class by whose labor the works which distinguish this generation are accomplished. (W, II, 56-57)

In later passages (in "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for") Thoreau adopts a less somber tone as he chides the railroads for their superficiality, their clamor and haste which lead nowhere, their emphasis on luxury rather than on safety. By lamenting the "hurry and waste of life" of those who "have the Saint Vitus' dance" (W, II, 146-47) he indicates a perceptive anticipation of what Daniel J. Boorstin brands "the technology of haste."⁴⁷ Thoreau sees that the preoccupation with luxury will make the railroad become "no better than a modern drawing room,

⁴⁷ Boorstin, p. 106.

with its divans, and ottomans, and sunshades, and a hundred other oriental things, which we are taking west with us, invented for the ladies of the harem and the effeminate natives of the Celestial Empire, which Jonathan should be ashamed to know the names of" (W, II, 60). Thoreau himself would prefer a private seat on a pumpkin to a crowded velvet cushion, and "would rather ride on earth in an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria all the way" (W, II, 60).⁴⁸ The railroad is a "pretty toy" which distracts man's attention from more serious matters, as do the proposed Maine-to-Texas telegraph and the trans-Atlantic cable. "They are but improved means to an unimproved end" (W, II, 84), Thoreau says. He presents the clamor of the depot in as absurd a light as possible--but with all-too-serious implications: "though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts 'All aboard!' when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over,--and it will be called, and will be, 'A melancholy accident'" (W, II, 86). To the million Irishmen who start up from their shanties across the nation and ask, "'What! . . . is not this railroad which we have built a good

⁴⁸ Harding, in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, p. 266, n. 103 points out the reference to Hawthorne's short story, "The Celestial Railroad." For a detailed treatment of Hawthorne's story, see Cronkhite, pp. 321-28.

thing?" Thoreau answers equivocally, "Yes, . . . comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt" (W, II, 87).

One of Thoreau's most celebrated railroad passages is that in which he deflates the "so-called internal improvements" (which are, for him, "all external and superficial") of a nation which lives too fast, loves luxury and "heedless expense," and is ruined "by want of calculation and a worthy aim."

Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. (W, II, 145-46)

Here Thoreau makes full use of his humor, and the pun on the word "sleeper," as well as the allusion to Hawthorne's satire of transcendentalism, "The Celestial Railroad," enhance the effectiveness of the passage as a whole.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁹ Harding, in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, p. 278, n. 38 cites another reference to Hawthorne's "Celestial Railroad" in this passage.

Irishmen and Yankees who "get out sleepers" upon which to lay the tracks are spiritually asleep. To few places in Walden do Thoreau's words on the title-page apply more readily: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up." He is crying "Wake up!" to those of his contemporaries who most need to be awakened, although his cry is the subtle, clever cry of the creative artist.

The chapter called "Sounds" in Walden contains the longest and most sustained account of the railroad in the entire book. In "Sounds," Thoreau reveals his "trackside intimacy"⁵⁰ and expresses most graphically the fundamental dichotomy that governs his thinking with regard to the machine. On the one hand, he views the tracks of the Fitchburg Railroad as his link with society (W, II, 180-81), while on the other hand, he asserts his refusal to "go to see/ Where it ends" (W, II, 192), his desire not to "have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing" (W, II, 192). This final statement of Thoreau's in the railroad passage is tantamount to his saying firmly, "I will not lose my vocation, as the cattle drovers and their dogs (W, II, 191) have done. I will not be destroyed by the railroads. I will preserve my integrity and my individuality."

⁵⁰ Cronkhite, p. 315.

Of course, Thoreau's attitude toward the railroad is not stated so harshly, and the dichotomy he establishes (to show how the railroad at once links him and separates him from society) is described throughout the nine-paragraph passage.⁵¹ Thoreau initially compares the rattling of the railroad to the beating of a partridge. He does not force the comparison. The sound of the train mingles naturally with the numerous sounds of the outdoors. At this point, Thoreau regards the railroad as another of the wild, vitally alive creatures of Walden, such as the hawks, pigeon, mink, and reedbirds. Even the common metaphor of the train as an "iron horse" conveys this sense of animal vitality; the expression becomes, in Thoreau's hands, much more than a cliché.⁵²

If the passage were to end here, the reader would have no choice but to conclude that Thoreau had only a deep admiration for the railroad.⁵³ While it is true that

⁵¹ Harding, in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, pp. 283-84, n. 9 reveals that the nine-paragraph railroad passage in "Sounds" first appeared as "The Iron Horse" in Sartain's Union Magazine in 1852 and underwent "numerous revisions of spelling, punctuation, and word choice." Shanley, p. 31, n. 32 also indicates that Thoreau revised the railroad passage before presenting its final version in Walden.

⁵² Cronkhite points out that "The locomotive of the 1840's had not yet grown too overwhelmingly large to be patronizingly referred to as 'the Iron Horse'" (p. 315).

⁵³ I realize, of course, that it is impossible to ignore Thoreau's comments on the railroad in the rest of the book, but I make this hypothesis merely to illustrate how Thoreau's position appears in the nine-paragraph passage in "Sounds."

he did admire the restless spirit of the trains, the "defiant snort" of the "fire-steed" (W, II, 184), it is equally true that he was disappointed in the railroads. As Leo Marx points out, Thoreau describes the railroad again, this time with a markedly different emphasis: now the locomotive's whistle is like the scream of a hawk. While still describing the train in animal terms, Thoreau is suggesting the discordance of the machine in its relation to nature.⁵⁴ He continues to express his dissatisfaction by contrasting the "train of clouds," the "celestial train" that climbs to heaven, with the "petty train" that hugs the earth and goes to Boston (W, II, 183).⁵⁵ We see simultaneously Thoreau's avowed respect for the promising power, motion, and energy of the never-tiring railroad, coupled with his unmistakable belief that something significant is still lacking. This antithesis is expressed by Thoreau through his conditional sentences ("If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!" W, II, 183), and "If the enterprise were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied!" W, II, 184). When he hears the smoking, flaming "iron horse" thundering over the hills, "it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it" (W, II, 182). However, he must

⁵⁴ Machine in the Garden, pp. 250-51.

⁵⁵ Once again, Harding, in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, p. 284, n. 21 reveals that the passage in question exhibits Thoreau's indebtedness to Hawthorne's "Celestial Railroad."

lament, "If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!" (W, II, 182-83). What Thoreau regrets, what causes his dissatisfaction and his crucial conflict of opinion, is the failure of the railroad's purpose to live up to its performance.⁵⁶ It is Thoreau's carefully formed judgment that the ends of the machine are not sufficiently noble, even though the machine has much potential for bettering mankind.

While Thoreau sees the railroad in its unbounded energy and freedom of movement, he also shows how the villagers of Concord regard the whistle of the train as an alarm clock, a restricting and confining device, which makes them move faster, doing things "railroad fashion." And yet he is forced to approve of the punctuality which results. In the isolation of Walden, Thoreau is free to accept or ignore the call of the trains; in Concord there is no "man so independent on his farm that he can say them nay" (W, II, 181).

By metaphorically associating the train's engine with Atropos, a mythological fate, Thoreau is admitting that, for better or worse, the railroads are an inevitable and essential institution in society. The Atropos that never turns aside, that does not stop to read the riot act or fire over the heads of the mob, elicits this admission from Thoreau: ". . . it is worth the while to be warned

⁵⁶ Cronkhite, p. 320.

so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track. . . . Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man's business, and the children go to school on the other track. We live the steadier for it. We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then" (W, II, 185-86).⁵⁷ Men, compelled as they are to be sons of Tell, susceptible to the inevitable forces at work within the universe, must therefore carry themselves apart from the paths of materialistic necessity which lead to a machine-like existence. They must follow their own paths, which, Thoreau maintains, lead to the preservation of the individual integrity. The railroad is inevitable, but it should not--indeed, must not, for Thoreau--dominate man's thoughts and actions, since it is not a celestial instrument which can lead man to heaven, but an infernal machine which can (if not properly dealt with) drive him in the opposite direction.

⁵⁷I am indebted to Professor William Drake for his suggestion that, since Atropos was the fate who cut the thread of life (as Harding also mentions in Variorum Walden and Variorum Civil Disobedience, p. 284, n. 25), Thoreau utilizes the reference to suggest that somehow the railroad is a harbinger of death--death of the pastoral way of life, and even physical death perhaps. Thus, when Thoreau says that "Every path but your own is the path of fate," he may be warning man not to waste his precious life by meekly giving in to technology.

Nevertheless, Thoreau, after citing the confining effect of the railroad on society, turns again to admire the railroad, this time for a fundamental reason. Thoreau deeply respects the "enterprise" and "bravery" of commerce (W, II, 186) as embodied in the railroad (even though, in "Economy," he states that "trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business" W, II, 111⁷), and he offers as the basis for commercial success the fact that commerce is "very natural in its methods withal" (W, II, 187). Because a railroad can operate in a "natural" way to Thoreau, he can be refreshed by it, he can become, in his own simile, "like a citizen of the world" (W, II, 187). Such an association of the railroad with nature reveals a consistency with Thoreau's earlier images of the railroad, comparing it to the restless, wild inhabitants of Walden Pond.

The optimism generated in the eighth paragraph of the discourse in "Sounds" is opposed by the sense of forlornness in the final paragraph, which ends, however, with a firm resolution on Thoreau's part. When the cattle car passes, with its whizzing and bleating, whirling away the "pastoral life" (W, II, 191-92), Thoreau realizes that he cannot follow such a devastating vehicle, and he resolves to remain separated from the railroad, isolated from society. Still, the fact remains that he has sincerely confronted the railroad, and only then decided to cross its tracks

"like a cart-path in the woods" (W, II, 192). Thoreau, as Leo Marx says, views the demise of pastoralism--that is, "pastoralism in the literal, agrarian sense"--with a cool clarity, and, while there is the feeling of forlornness, there is also the clear refusal to succumb to the illusion that Atropos can be stopped.⁵⁸

When Thoreau says decisively that he will not have his eyes put out and his ears spoiled by the smoke and steam and hissing of the railroad, he is preserving not only his integrity but also his vital powers of perception, his acute senses.⁵⁹ The salvation of his senses is what makes it possible for him to see the crucial issue of his survival in the freedom of Walden while being threatened by the inevitable demands of the machine in all of its dimensions. By facing up to the issue in the most concrete terms possible (those of his nature images which utilize the life around him in a symbolic way), by envisioning his struggle with "progress" in terms of an encounter with a train, Thoreau has, in "Sounds," summarized the significance and scope of all of Walden.⁶⁰ He accepts the railroad as

⁵⁸ Machine in the Garden, p. 254.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the importance of Thoreau's senses as instruments of his style, see Marx, Machine in the Garden, p. 255 and Matthiessen, pp. 87-89.

⁶⁰ Marvin Fisher, "The Iconology of Industrialism, 1830-1860," American Quarterly, 13 (1961), 347-64 presents an intriguing notion with regard to those who indulged in "a sort of transcendental self-deception." These individuals, by saying that the railroad fit in with the scheme of the wilderness, and by assigning to the machine the

an inevitable part of life; he accepts technology as a necessary evil.⁶¹

Thoreau's self-declared separation from the railroad and from society is a purely symbolic gesture. "Sounds," with its preponderance of figurative language, is a transparent, artful contrivance which foreshadows Thoreau's ultimate solution to the dilemma of the machine and the Concord way of life. For Thoreau, the answer to the dilemma is something which is in the realm of consciousness: such an answer is "a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mythopoeic power of the human mind" which receives its most vivid expression in the climactic passage in "Spring," when the "Deep Cut"

qualities of animals or living beings, are (according to Fisher) likely making "an effort to bring the strange and fearsome thing into the circle of the familiar, to placate it and to calm their own fears. . . ." Fisher says these efforts "were neither deliberate nor rational but rather covert and unacknowledged," or, in psychological terms, they are "the result of free association which permits preconscious analogic processes." It is my contention that the "transcendental self-deception" Fisher speaks of does not apply to Thoreau for, while he certainly does provide the railroad with animal-like qualities, he does so through a careful and conscious symbolism which is deliberate and rational rather than covert and unacknowledged. The ideas expressed in Fisher's article are enlarged upon in his Workshops in the Wilderness: The European Response to American Industrialization, 1830-1860 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

⁶¹ Another aspect of the railroad which Thoreau came to accept was the companionship which it offered, in a figurative sense, of course. For Thoreau says, in the sentence immediately following the nine-paragraph railroad passage in "Sounds": "Now that the cars are gone by and all the restless world with them, and the fishes in the pond no longer feel their rumbling, I am more alone than ever" (W, II, 192). It is therefore ironic that Thoreau's two principal neighbors at Walden are the trains and the

inflicted by the railroad on the landscape thaws, and the melting sand evokes the birth of life out of inorganic matter.⁶²

Since Thoreau's resolution was symbolic and not literal, he was able to put an end to his Walden sojourn, his "experiment of living" (W, II, 82), and to accept the railroads on a practical level. Accordingly, he could bring himself actually to ride the trains to Cape Cod, Maine, and Canada, but not to capitalize upon the financial advantages of the railroad as did Emerson, who had acquired railroad stock before 1848 and who, by 1854--the very year in which Walden was published--held stocks or

pond (see Cronkhite, p. 315), for Thoreau, particularly in "The Ponds," sets in opposition the pure waters of Walden and the dirty, devilish trains. "Though seen but once, it [Walden Pond] helps to wash out State-street and the engine's soot" (W, II, 303), he says, after attacking the bestial train in a bitter tirade: "That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddled the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore, that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks! Where is the country's champion, the Moore of Moore Hall, to meet him at the Deep Cut and thrust an avenging lance between the ribs of the bloated pest?" (W, II, 301-02). Thoreau settles the issue by asserting the perennial purity of the pond. Thus, despite the woodchoppers, the sties of the Irishmen, the railroad, and the ice crews, "it [the pond] is itself unchanged . . . all the change is in me" (W, II, 302).

⁶² Marx, Machine in the Garden, pp. 253, 260-63. The account of the emergence of the bug from the apple-tree wood table, in the "Conclusion," is another example of Thoreau's presentation of the birth of life from what is inorganic, as well as an artistically appropriate and satisfying ending for the book, Thoreau's final symbolic gesture in Walden.

bonds in at least six railroads.⁶³ Perhaps the best statement of Thoreau's ultimate acceptance of the railroads and all they represent is his remark, near the end of the railroad passage in "Sounds," "I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a man's real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or worse in this state of existence" (W, II, 189). Earlier, in "Economy," he had offered additional indications of his acceptance: "Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins to-day, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer" (W, II, 65); and "I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will" (W, II, 116).

Thoreau's symbolic resolution to his crisis was also a personal and private one, and he made no effort to compel his contemporaries to conform to his ideas. "I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible" (W, II, 113). What Thoreau sought was for each

⁶³ Cronkhite, pp. 318, 308.

man, each individual self, to "be very careful to pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead" (W, II, 113). "In the long run men hit only what they aim at," Thoreau says. "Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high" (W, II, 44). Thoreau could not and would not stop men from building railroads, but his being existed for higher pursuits. He chides:

What's the railroad to me?
I never go to see
Where it ends. (W, II, 192, vv. 1-3)⁶⁴

His "railroad" work was for a nobler end than that of the Fitchburg Railroad: "I too would fain be a track-repairer somewhere in the orbit of the earth" (W, II, 181).

Van Wyck Brooks has said of Thoreau's two years at Walden: "If he had had the wealth of Croesus, Henry's mode of living would not have been different. Space, air, time, a few tools, a note-book, a pen, a copy of Homer, what could he wish more than these? A bath in the pond at sunrise, a little Spartan sweeping and cleaning, then a bath for the intellect, perhaps in the Bhagavad-Gita, the pure water of Walden mingling in his mind with the sacred water of the Ganges. The day was his, for any wild adventure."⁶⁵ That this "wild adventure," this penetration

⁶⁴ The poem also appears in Bode, ed., Collected Poems, enlarged ed., p. 25.

⁶⁵ The Flowering of New England: 1815-1865, Rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1940), p. 361.

of "the interior beyond the shores of America,"⁶⁶ this testing of a system of machines and materialism, was successful is confirmed by Walden--the book itself.⁶⁷ Henry S. Salt, one of Thoreau's earliest--and yet, ironically enough, still one of his sanest and most perceptive--biographers, makes the point in another way. Thoreau, he says, despite the frequent contentions of his detractors that what he preached was not practicable, had not the slightest intention "of abjuring a single product of civilisation which is of no real use to men."⁶⁸ Rather, Salt explains, Thoreau merely held up his Walden experiment as a means to encourage mankind "to live a simpler and saner life."⁶⁹ Moreover, as Salt makes unmistakably clear, the Walden years--and Walden itself--indicate "a time of self-probation" for Thoreau; "this was the time when his thoughts ripened, and his ethical creed assumed a definite form."⁷⁰ In Walden, Thoreau's confrontation with technology was instrumental in shaping his image of himself. Thus, just as, for Thoreau, not an inch of the one-hundred-and-two-foot-deep Walden Pond could be spared by the imagination

⁶⁶ Paul, Shores, p. 417.

⁶⁷ Marx, Machine in the Garden, p. 243.

⁶⁸ Life of . . . Thoreau, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

(W, II, 442),⁷¹ neither can a single word be spared from Walden.

What is most disconcerting is the fear that Thoreau's two years at Walden (as, indeed, his whole life, since it was consumed with the task of revealing the vision that was Walden) were sacrificed to a delusion. Such is the case, Perry Miller asserts, if the twentieth-century judgment of the Romantic aesthetic, and its refutation of Romantic naturalism, is correct.⁷² However, those who would seek, like the loon described in "Brute Neighbors," to laugh demoniacally in derision of Thoreau's efforts should realize the nature of his conflict.⁷³ Thoreau, as Walden makes known, admitted the inevitability of technological progress and even offered his acceptance of such

⁷¹ As Drake, "Walden," p. 90 puts it so aptly: "The strategic metaphor in Walden becomes the exploration of one's own life surroundings, because only here has one the centrality of focus from which to lay out measurements in all directions. One finds himself wherever he is by finding where he is. Walden Pond is only as deep as one's self, depending on the extent of its service to the imagination; for nature provides the only trustworthy measurement of man."

⁷² "Thoreau in . . . Context . . . ," 157-58.

⁷³ It is interesting to note how Thoreau, in his awareness of the limitation of words, the "inadequacy of the residual statement," reveals a fundamental faith in "the volatile truth" which the words express. His statement, from the "Conclusion" of Walden, might well apply to the limitations of his solution to the dilemma of the vanishing wilderness, and serve as a rejoinder to those who consider Walden a delusion or failure:

I desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. Who

drastic change. That he could do so without loss to his aesthetic sensibilities or to his artistic integrity indicates not, as Perry Miller would have it, that Walden was a "perverse pilgrimage" in which Thoreau "anticipated the impossible, so as never to be seduced by the moments he loved so passionately."⁷⁴ In Walden, as throughout his life, Thoreau, by an obsessive cultivation of his senses, sought to capture as many passionate moments as he could.

that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should speak extravagantly any more forever? In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains. The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures. (W, II, 500-01)

Similarly, Emerson's words from "The Transcendentalist" manifest the belief that such visions as Thoreau's will remain impervious to the changes which make even the most modern technology obsolete:

Soon these improvements and mechanical inventions will be superseded, these modes of living lost out of memory; these cities rotted, ruined by war, by new inventions, by new seats of trade, or the geologic changes:--all gone, like the shells which sprinkle the sea-beach with a white colony today, forever renewed to be forever destroyed. But the thoughts which these few hermits strove to proclaim by silence as well as by speech, not only by what they did, but by what they forebore to do, shall abide in beauty and strength, to reorganize themselves in nature, to invest themselves anew in other, perhaps higher endowed and happier mixed clay than ours, in fuller union with the surrounding system. (Selections, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, p. 206)

⁷⁴ Consciousness in Concord, p. 127.

It may be literally true, as Leo Stoller says, that Thoreau was never able to combine satisfactorily the new system of production with his noble aim of self-culture and that, with the recession of the frontier, Thoreau "was left with a critique of individual and commercial civilization but with no associated program of action."⁷⁵ But it is also true, as Leo Marx concludes at the end of The Machine in the Garden, that Thoreau's inability "to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape" can hardly be counted as an artistic failure. To change the situation requires new symbols, the creation of which is the responsibility of society much more than of the artist. In Marx's words, "The machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics."⁷⁶ And, if there is one thing which Thoreau was not, it is a politician.

Thoreau, in his imaginative re-creation of his life in the woods, testifies that time and circumstances--and material difficulties of all sorts--had a decidedly positive

⁷⁵ "Thoreau's . . . Simplicity," pp. 453-60. See also Stoller's After Walden for a detailed examination of Thoreau's post-Walden economic viewpoints. William Drake, for one would argue that Thoreau, in Walden, adopted a practical program of action, in addition to his symbolic search for self-discovery: "Walden describes a practical experiment, to discover how far the 'higher potentialities of a human being can be developed, when one lives deliberately.' These are not simply the insights of one's thought, but a solution of the problems that cause anxiety, conflict, or sluggishness" ("Walden," p. 71).

⁷⁶ Machine in the Garden, p. 365.

rather than negative effect on his literary accomplishments. The affirmation with which he concludes Walden is the product of both wit and wisdom, the triumph of art over the adversities of experience. J. Lyndon Shanley speaks of a second and more practical triumph for Thoreau: "The much-lamented plight of the artist in America may have its good effects. Indirectly, the public's lack of appreciation of A Week had a great deal to do with Walden's being the masterpiece it is. The financial failure of A Week kept Thoreau from publishing Walden when he first wanted to, and when he did publish it five years later, he had enlarged and improved it almost beyond compare."⁷⁷ In more ways than one, as Emerson would have put it, Thoreau, in Walden, had harvested his losses, and turned the dust of his shoes to gems.

⁷⁷ Shanley, p. 30.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOREST PRIMEVAL AND THE SEA OF FAITH

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and dreer and inhuman. . . . Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. . . . It was Matter, vast, terrific . . . the home, this, of Necessity and Fate.

-Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods ("Ktaadn")

The seashore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world. It is even a trivial place. The waves forever rolling to the land are too far-traveled and untamable to be familiar. Creeping along the endless beach amid the sun-squall and the foam, it occurs to us that we, too, are the product of sea-slime.

-Henry David Thoreau, Cape Cod

I

For many of Thoreau's critics and biographers, his last eight years (between Walden and his death) were marked by unhappiness and virtual despair; his final works, to

some, are little more than the disjointed or unfinished scrawlings of a pathetically sick man. Leon Edel speaks of "distinct pathological traits in Thoreau, a constant sense . . . of inner disintegration"; he sees the later Thoreau as a deeply troubled man obsessed with death, showing a "little observed Poesque streak," undergoing "a crisis of identity."¹ Perry Miller, only slightly less emphatically, describes Thoreau's "defiance of extinction," a conscious effort "to talk death down" which persisted until his last days.² Leo Marx, commenting on the late essays of Excursions, many of which were revised by Thoreau on his death-bed, refers to them as examples of Thoreau's "ineluctably failing powers."³ Marx attributes the shortcomings of the late essays to Thoreau's desperate state of irrationality, his blindly formulated doctrine of "wildness": "as he became more desperate, toward the end, he intensified his renunciation of reason. Avid of order, yet without confidence in mind, Thoreau now fell back on a doctrine of instinct or 'wildness.' But it manifestly was not enough. In the absence of a revelation, he had renounced too much."⁴

¹ Edel, p. 43.

² Consciousness in Concord, p. 66.

³ "Introduction" to Excursions, p. viii.

⁴ Ibid., p. xiv.

Despite such gloomy pictures of the later Thoreau, a detailed study of his last works reveals, rather than a mindlessly formulated attempt to escape death, a realistic recognition of its inevitability. And, what is more, it is through an appreciation for "wildness" that Thoreau came to know--and enthusiastically accept--the mystery of man's origin and the sobering fact of his death. Thoreau the idealist, the young would-be poet who, ever since his graduation from Harvard, had attempted to determine if the machine could impart spiritual value becomes, in his last years, a realist who accepts both death and the inevitability of mechanization. But the machine, Thoreau finds, is inadequate, incapable of being harmonized with the life of the artist. He comes to blame man's shortcomings on a lack of wildness; however, rather than destroying the machine (an impossible task), he offers mankind, as his last will and testament, a constructive doctrine of conservation.

Precisely when Thoreau came to formulate his notion of wildness is difficult to determine. As early as A Week, for example, he had admitted (as Krutch points out), "There is in my nature, methinks, a singular yearning towards all wildness. . . ." ⁵ And again, in Walden, particularly in his memorable description of his primitive impulse to eat a woodchuck raw, he betrays the same feeling

⁵ Thoreau, quoted by Krutch in Henry David Thoreau, p. 55.

much more concretely.⁶ "Few of the poets and philosophers," Krutch reveals, "who have ever made nature their theme or have sought in her their God ever had, or ever desired to have, Thoreau's kind of experience with nature's least humanized aspects."⁷ Moreover, as Krutch observes, Thoreau's preference for the wild is "one that persisted with least modification through life"; indeed, Thoreau's doctrine of wildness came to loom largest in those writings at the end of his career.⁸ Thoreau's theme of wildness is what, perhaps more than anything else, pervades the works of the post-Walden period and helps to lend unity to his final essays and books, as fragmented or incomplete as some critics have found them to be.

"Walking," although it has been called "the least organized" or Thoreau's shorter works,⁹ is one of the first pieces after Walden to explore seriously the notion that much of man's dehumanization has come about through a failure to understand or appreciate the wildness of the

⁶ Krutch, ibid., p. 61, points out the necessity of realizing that Thoreau did not espouse wildness as an end in itself and indicates that Thoreau may have come to such a position as a result of his association with Therien, the wood chopper of Walden: "Perhaps the association with Therien helped to prevent Thoreau from ever falling into the delusion that he wished actually to return to the merely primitive man, or that wildness, for all that he cherished a strain of it in himself and others, was sufficient in itself."

⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 70.

natural world. The essay, not published until June, 1862 in the Atlantic Monthly, was based on Journal material of the early 1850's and was revised by Thoreau only a few months before his death.¹⁰ "Walking" may be divided into two main parts, the first, as Walter Harding points out, "a delightful essay on the joys of walking" (which sometimes "becomes almost chauvinistic in boasting the superiority of the American landscape to the European") and the second "an essay on 'the Wild,'" an appeal for "civilized men to return to nature now and then for 'nourishment and vigor.'"¹¹

At the very beginning of the essay, Thoreau takes pains to make his intention clear: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,--to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (W, IX, 251). Thoreau, as his opening statement indicates, wishes to consider man as a creature of nature, a being whose first and most important domain is that of the wild, rather than civilization. Just as he had spoken with exaggeration as Chanticleer in Walden, he again addresses mankind in his characteristic and admittedly radical language: "I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one . . ."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

(W, IX, 251). Before he makes his "extreme statement" extolling the wild, he makes a similar statement about the true nature of walking. Walkers, he says, half-playfully, yet quite serious beneath the wry humor, those with a genius "for sauntering" (W, IX, 251), are rare creatures indeed. That this is so is, for Thoreau, a sad commentary on the state of contemporary affairs. For the reason there are so few walkers is that man, with his seemingly unending obsession with "progress," has become too softened physically and too crass in his attitude toward his environment. As Thoreau puts it ruefully, "Nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more tame and cheap" (W, IX, 259). And his picture of the future is equally sobering, as he anticipates the virtual taming of the entire wilderness: "At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure-grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only,--when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the public road, and walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds" (W, IX, 264-65).

Thoreau's alternative to the elimination of the primitive landscape is a celebration of the wild for its healthiness and its ability to invigorate man. "Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come" (W, IX, 265), he exhorts and, for the remainder of his essay, he develops this notion with the fervor of an evangelist. The ultimate "gospel" of "Walking," "the gospel according to this moment" (W, IX, 301), is "that in Wildness is the preservation of the World" (W, IX, 275). Wildness, Thoreau boasts, produces "the tonic and barks which brace mankind" (W, IX, 275); "A man's health," he contends, in perhaps an overpoweringly earthy image, "requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck" (W, IX, 280).

Not only does the wild produce physical health (an idea Thoreau had been proposing at least as early as the "Natural History of Massachusetts" and "A Walk to Wachusett"). It also provides man with the spiritual regeneration necessary to overturn the trivial demands of a mechanical or materialistic world. Thus, "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest" (W, IX, 277). Those men who have been "tamed" by industrialism, those who are too busy to appreciate the beauty of the landscape (W, IX, 296), those who fail to perceive that "all good things are wild and free" (W, IX, 287) are like tame cattle, "meeting the horse and the ox half-way" (W, IX, 288).

To reap the physical and spiritual advantages which the wild offers, man has but to be properly humble, to realize that total cultivation of the landscape is undesirable (W, IX, 292), that knowledge and technology--all progress sought for its own sake--are unsatisfactory if they become ends in themselves. "A man's ignorance," Thoreau says, "sometimes is not only useful, but beautiful" (W, IX, 294). Anticipating The Maine Woods and Cape Cod, with their admission of the mystery of nature and of its superiority in the face of mere mortals, he says, "My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. . . . there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy" (W, IX, 294). What Thoreau calls for is not a complete renunciation of reason and an absurd return to a state of savagery. All that men must do, he says, is refuse to "become submissive members of society" (W, IX, 288); they should make an effort to perceive the vast "personality" of nature (W, IX, 297); they should, in short, extinguish the "unnecessary fires of ambition" (W, IX, 299) and be appreciative of the grand commonplaces of nature. Krutch admits as much when he states that "Even at Walden, where he was admittedly conducting a somewhat extreme experiment, he [Thoreau] was seeking not so much to get away from either men or the things they had surrounded themselves with as from the

demands which they and their kind of society made upon him."¹²

Thoreau himself celebrates one of nature's delightful daily phenomena at the conclusion of "Walking." He recalls "a remarkable sunset" which he had observed on a previous November day (W, IX, 302). He walks in a meadow, delighting in the simple setting of the sun over a simple meadow:

"It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow" (W, IX, 302-03). What makes the event so remarkable is its very simplicity; such a manifestation of "wildness," he realizes, "would happen forever and ever an infinite number of evenings" and this, to Thoreau, makes the sunset "more glorious still" (W, IX, 303). With the hope of his vision before him, he closes the essay with a glowing anticipation of the day when more men than he alone will see such simple natural phenomena as a means of moral betterment: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn" (W, IX, 303-04).

¹² Krutch, Henry David Thoreau, pp. 81-82.

It is ironic that Leo Marx, who praises Thoreau's efforts in Walden "to repudiate the workaday world . . . for aesthetic purposes," comes to condemn "Walking" because it is practical as well as aesthetic in its resolution to the dilemma of mechanization. For in "Walking," Marx alleges, Thoreau "speaks as an extreme primitive-anarchist"; his "doctrine of 'wildness' becomes indistinguishable from the shadowy bliss of infantile mindlessness."¹³ Yet, to observe a sunset and to delight in its splendor is neither "infantile" nor "mindless": it is, rather, to celebrate simplicity and to disdain anything that is superfluous or debased. Such a gesture, totally impractical in material terms, becomes highly practical when man gives priority to his spiritual betterment. As Krutch puts it, Thoreau "never proposed, as flippant critics seem usually to assume, that we should dispense with all the material inventions of civilization, much less its intellectual refinements. Neither did he ever seriously believe that all the latter could be maintained without any of the former. What he did wish to find out was how many tools and conveniences were really necessary and at what point they began to cost more in time and effort than they were worth."¹⁴ Or, in Sherman Paul's words, Thoreau's "primitivism, like his call for simplicity, was only a way of

¹³ "Introduction" to Excursions, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Krutch, Henry David Thoreau, p. 81.

confronting again the essentials of life; they were means, not articles of faith."¹⁵

II

The three final essays from Excursions, "Autumnal Tints," "Wild Apples," and "Night and Moonlight," reinforce Thoreau's concept of wildness and contain sporadic--but rather emphatic--passages which praise the simple attractions of the wild at the expense of the trivialities of civilized life. These essays, like "Walking," were derived chiefly from Thoreau's Journal of the 1850's and were delivered in lecture form. All were revised by Thoreau in his last months and were published posthumously.¹⁶ "Autumnal Tints" is essentially Thoreau's detailed delineation of "the brilliancy of our autumnal foliage" (W, IX, 305), a catalogue of the colors of autumn, but it also demonstrates the extent to which Thoreau took refuge in the natural world in his last years. Thoreau, though his already poor health worsened greatly after 1855, regained his vigor periodically after that date.¹⁷ Not unexpectedly,

¹⁵ Shores, p. 155.

¹⁶ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, pp. 71-73. "Autumnal Tints" was published in October, 1862 in the Atlantic Monthly; "Wild Apples" appeared in the Atlantic for November, 1862; and "Night and Moonlight" was printed first in November, 1863 in the Atlantic.

¹⁷ For discussions of Thoreau's deteriorating health, see Harding, Days, p. 357 and Salt, p. 135, among others.

one of the first activities he undertook when his health permitted was his sauntering, his careful examination of the landscape. Walter Harding has observed that, "Had Thoreau not spent so many hours of each day in the out of doors, it is quite possible that tuberculosis would have carried him off earlier than it did."¹⁸

In "Autumnal Tints," the declining Thoreau reveals quite vividly that his senses have not failed him. He revels in pressing wild berries between his fingers and seeing "their juice staining my hand" (W, IX, 312). He welcomes the solitude which the isolated fields provide: "Think what refuge there is for one, before August is over, from college commencements and society that isolates! I can skulk amid the tufts of Purple Wood-Grass on the borders of the 'Great Fields'" (W, IX, 314-15). And of those farmers who "rush by and trample down plants" merely to feed their cattle, without taking time to appreciate their beauty, he says sharply, "Beauty and true wealth are always thus cheap and despised. Heaven might be defined as the place which men avoid" (W, IX, 315). Indeed, all of those whose lives are too preoccupied by their daily pursuits to take time to "listen" to nature, merit nothing but scorn from Thoreau: "Nature does not cast pearls before swine. There is just as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate,--not a grain more" (W, IX, 351).

¹⁸ A Thoreau Handbook, p. 13.

Yet Thoreau would not have man seek the wild merely as a place in which to stain his fingers or to skulk in solitude. For Thoreau, the wild is of a much deeper significance: it is the place in which man can come to take the measure of his very soul. The natural, or, in other words, the uncivilized, is the proper preacher for Thoreau. He sees the Poke plant (a purple grass) as a symbol of "perfect maturity": "It is the emblem of a successful life concluded by a death not premature, which is an ornament to Nature. What if we," continues Thoreau, conscious of his own state of physical decline, "were to mature as perfectly, root and branch, glowing in the midst of our decay, like the Poke!" (W, IX, 312). He sights the elms of early October, their leaves "perfectly ripe," and wonders "if there is any answering ripeness in the lives of the men who live beneath them" (W, IX, 322). He trods on fallen leaves and receives a vital lesson in the nobility of death: "They that soared so loftily, how contentedly they return to dust again, and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of the tree, and afford nourishment to new generations of their kind, as well as to flutter on high! They teach us how to die. One wonders if the time will ever come when men, with their boasted faith in immortality, will lie down as gracefully and as ripe,-- with such an Indian-summer serenity will shed their bodies, as they do their hair and nails" (W, IX, 331).

Such tranquil pronouncements about death are a far cry from the early distaste for human frailty and decay which, according to Perry Miller, was an obsession with the young Thoreau.¹⁹ The sickly author of "Autumnal Tints," by his praise for the Poke plant and the elm, and for the dead leaves of autumn, is the same Thoreau who asserts of a pine tree in The Maine Woods, "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still" (W, III, 165). For Thoreau, in his final period, sees the wild as a symbol of immortality, a harbinger of death but also an emblem of freshness and purity. The natural corruption of the wild is antithetical to the spiritual corruption of mankind.

"Wild Apples," like "Autumnal Tints," conveys Thoreau's exuberant message of the vitality of the wild. Thoreau claims for "all natural products a certain volatile and ethereal quality which represents their highest value, and which cannot be vulgarized, or bought and sold" (W, IX, 362). Thus, when he sees "a particularly mean man carrying a load of fair and fragrant early apples to market," he sees "the stream of their evanescent and celestial qualities going to heaven from his cart, while the pulp and skin only are going to market" (W, IX, 363). In a simple Thoreauvian "parable," the wild-apple shrub betokens

¹⁹ See in particular Miller's chapter, "The Stratagems of Consciousness--Death," in Consciousness in Concord, pp. 55-79.

(in a manner quite reminiscent of the apple-tree table passage at the end of Walden) all that is noble and uplifting in man himself: "What a lesson to man! So are human beings, referred to the highest standard, the celestial fruit which they suggest and aspire to bear, browsed on by fate; and only the most persistent and strongest genius defends itself and prevails, sends a tender scion upward at last, and drops its perfect fruit on the ungrateful earth" (W, IX, 377).

Cognizant of the physical and spiritual benefits which the wild can provide, Thoreau becomes deeply troubled with the knowledge that such wildness is being both abused and terminated by mankind in its desire to "progress." Krutch, in his lucid way, makes the point thus: ". . . it was the inevitable and rapid destruction of wild nature which horrified him [Thoreau], and his realization that this necessarily went hand in hand with what his fellow citizens regarded as progress is probably the original source of his rationalized conviction that the so-called 'development' of America was, in truth, its destruction, morally as well as physically."²⁰ Thus, while "Wild Apples" is generally a whimsical and humorous familiar essay,²¹ it becomes, in its final pages, a stern warning to the masses. Thoreau predicts grimly: "The era of the Wild Apple will soon be

²⁰ Krutch, Henry David Thoreau, pp. 59-60.

²¹ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, pp. 71-72.

past. It is a fruit which will probably become extinct in New England" (W, IX, 394). He then draws from "'The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel'" (W, IX, 395) and the strident Biblical passage is, to his contemporaries (as to audiences today) a necessary admonition. As John J. McAleer puts it, "'Wild Apples' is a tour de force, a sustained paean of praise proclaiming the joys of Nature. . . . For this very reason the Biblical passage coming at the close of 'Wild Apples' strikes as much terror into our hearts as would a threat of nuclear war: 'the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men.' By snatching back from us the apple he has given us, in this fashion, he creates in us an Adamic sense of the loss of prelapsarian bliss, and the point is made that modern man, by spurning Nature, courts a new exile."²²

Thoreau, near the beginning of his essay, had jestingly remarked of the apple, "Some have thought that the first human pair were tempted by its fruit" (W, IX, 357); now, at the conclusion, he sees the wild apple not as an instrument of damnation, but as a valuable vehicle for salvation.

"Night and Moonlight," the last essay of Excursions, sustains Thoreau's picture of the simple but satisfying life that man can find in nature. Like "Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," it conveys his belief that if man would

²² "Therapeutic Vituperations," p. 86.

endeavor to elevate his ideals, he need not fear for the future. As the very title reveals, Thoreau examines nature from a new perspective: he considers midnight rather than the dawn. Yet the visions of the midnight hour are as promising as those hopeful dawn-glimpses of Walden. The midnight, mysterious and unfamiliar "like Central Africa to most of us" (W, IX, 397), is nevertheless a time of "fertility and beauty, moral and natural" (W, IX, 397). "Night," Thoreau contends, "is certainly more novel and less profane than day" (W, IX, 398). Though "The woods are heavy and dark" (W, IX, 402), man's senses are alert, and a sensitive and wise man discerns that the night exists "with its dews and darkness . . . to restore the drooping world" (W, IX, 406).

Thus, to one whose consciousness, whose entire being, is attuned to the lunar influence, to one who, in other words, is not asleep (W, IX, 405), the moon is unmistakably fascinating: "As the shades begin to gather around us, our primeval instincts are aroused, and we steal forth from our lairs, like the inhabitants of the jungle, in search of those silent and brooding thoughts which are the natural prey of the intellect" (W, IX, 406). What the intellect discovers in such a nocturnal quest is precisely what Thoreau discovers in the savage and nearly unexplored regions of the Maine forests and the merciless shore of Cape Cod: the total impartiality of nature, its primordial power: "Nature is an instructed and impartial teacher,

spreading no crude opinions, and flattering none. . . . Consider the moonlight, so civil, yet so savage!" (W, IX, 408). Such a discovery is no cause for despair, however; if it makes Thoreau aware of the triviality of man amid the vastness of nature, it also challenges him to perfect himself so that he can be a worthy denizen of such a world. Thus, the night, primeval and savage as it may be, exists so that man may make his days more meaningful or, to use one of Thoreau's favorite phrases, so that he may "improve the nick of time": "Of what significance the light of day, if it is not the reflection of an inward dawn?--to what purpose is the veil of night withdrawn, if the morning reveals nothing to the soul? It is merely garish and glaring" (W, IX, 408).

III

Thoreau's fullest recognition of the fundamental wildness of nature and of man's place as a creature of such a realm may be seen in The Maine Woods and Cape Cod. In the former he explores the wildest aspects of nature that he had ever encountered, and he expresses a deep sense of awe in the presence of the raw and untameable. In the latter, he scans the shore, fascinated at the vastness of the unfeeling sea, at once man's metaphorical womb and tomb. Both The Maine Woods and Cape Cod admit the finitude of man but also incorporate the hopefulness of "Walking" and the later Excursion essays, so that Thoreau can both

accept his own death with a magnificent calmness and impart his hope for human improvement to the world in the form of a noble conservation ethic.

While portions of The Maine Woods were published prior to Thoreau's death,²³ Thoreau was working on "The Allegash and East Branch," the book's final chapter, at the time of his death, and the book is, therefore, not well-integrated and somewhat incomplete.²⁴ Nevertheless, recurrent themes appear in the book (based on three separate expeditions): the pristine savagery and splendor of the wilderness, man's intrusion in the forest, and the necessity of establishing wilderness tracts that will be preserved for posterity. "Ktaadn," the first chapter, published serially in 1848, describes a setting of nearly total wildness and isolation. At various stages of the trip to Mt. Katahdin, the forest region is described by Thoreau as "grim, untrodden wilderness" (W, III, 12), "an immense country of uninterrupted forest" (W, III, 26), "a savage and dreary scenery" (W, III, 82), "the virgin forest of the New World" (W, III, 111).

Even in this "new world," this "lake-country of New England" (W, III, 47), Thoreau witnesses traces of man-made

²³ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 73. "Ktaadn" appeared serially in the Union Magazine from July through November, 1848; "Chesuncook" was published serially in the Atlantic Monthly between June and August, 1858.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 73-74.

evil, in the form of the logging business in particular. Sherman Paul perceives that, as Thoreau "saw the beginnings of trade and the divestment of the forest, he was distressed by the waste and inevitable doom of the wilderness"; in "Ktaadn" he was "first made aware perhaps of the need to preserve the wild, a theme which, with increasing persistence, he developed in his later years."²⁵ Accordingly, when Thoreau observes that a mill owner, one Mr. Sawyer, "marks off those spaces which decide the destiny of so many prostrate forests" (W, III, 3), he bewails, "Think how stood the white-pine tree on the shore of Chesuncook, its branches souging with the four winds, and every individual needle trembling in the sunlight,--think how it stands with it now,--sold, perchance, to the New England Friction-Match Company!" (W, III, 4). Then he unleashes a vitriolic condemnation of those who exploit the forests: "The mission of men there seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive the forest all out of the country, from every solitary beaver-swamp and mountain-side, as soon as possible" (W, III, 4).

In "Chesuncook" (1858) and the unfinished "Allegash and East Branch," Thoreau will continue to attack the profiteers who deface the landscape, interrupting the descriptive passages of his travel account to drive home his criticism. But before returning to his condemnation of mankind,

²⁵ Shores, p. 359.

he comes face to face--for perhaps the first time in his life--with the absolutely primeval quality of nature. He discovers a startling and yet basic fact, that nature itself contains the very essence of evil. Before, he had observed only the good in nature; now he is compelled to admit: "This was what you might call a bran-new country; the only roads were of Nature's making, and the few houses were camps. Here, then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil" (W, III, 19-20). Thoreau discovers this "true source of evil" while scaling Mt. Katahdin. Earlier, he had described the vast summit (as seen from a distance) rather light-heartedly: "The summit . . . had a singularly flat, table-land appearance, like a short highway, where a demigod might be let down to take a turn or two in an afternoon, to settle his dinner" (W, III, 59). But now, upon a closer scrutiny, the summit becomes "a cloud factory" that "was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits" (W, III, 85). Thoreau, climbing higher in the clouds as his companions lag behind, comes to know an eerie loneliness, an utter solitude, that places him in the role of an intruder in a harsh and alien world:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him man at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I am kind. Why seek

me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear. (W, III, 85-86)

Thoreau's reaction to his discovery is one of acceptance: unlike Melville's Ahab, who consciously rebels against the elemental power of the white whale, Thoreau, duly awe-stricken and somewhat humbled, confesses man's smallness and helplessness in the face of the primeval. "Perhaps," he says as he descends Katahdin after overtaking his friends, "I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untamable Nature, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain" (W, III, 93). While he feels that "It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man" (W, III, 94), he concludes that this is the realm "of Necessity and Fate," where there is "a force not bound to be kind to man" (W, III, 94). The realization leaves him with a momentary sense of disorientation, in which he cries, "I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. . . . What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?" (W, III, 95). Such an utterance is significant for being unique in Thoreau's life; Sherman Paul has accurately noted that this, "the most frenzied passage

he [Thoreau] was ever to write," was "a passage that could not be passed off as extravagance."²⁶ In such a state of excitement, Thoreau manifests his complete awareness of the here-and-now: the youthful would-be poet of "uncommon sense" who had sought the divine, the ideal, gives way to the man of "common sense" who contemplates the impact of the actual upon man's life.

In "Ktaadn," therefore, Thoreau's recognition of the sheer savagery of the natural world at its wildest extreme leads him to the discovery that the physical world, the actual world, is worth man's examination in and of itself. No longer must the actual world be but an unsatisfactory substitute for the ideal: it becomes, in a sense, an ideal itself, for through it man may discern the fundamental nature of human existence. Wildness--the epitome of nature in its "actual," not its "ideal" state--becomes the necessary medium through which man attains a glimpse of his physical and spiritual frailty. And man, guided by such a knowledge of his proper place in nature, conscious of his limitations, can then see the value of leading a noble and non-mechanical life. For, if nature is to triumph and man is someday to die, as Thoreau had said time and again in a variety of ways, all of his efforts at mere material production, all of his rampant exploitation of the wilderness, is but an absurd waste of time and

²⁶ Ibid., p. 361.

effort. Man, rather than contending foolishly or blindly against nature, should welcome the wild as a reminder of both his potential and his shortcomings.

Thoreau himself takes deeply to heart the lesson which Katahdin has taught him. In essence, he rejects his early and persistent goal, first stated in "Paradise (to be) Regained," that of trying to make "the mechanical forces" become "generously and largely applied to make the physical world answer to the ideal" (W, X, 69). This, he discovers, is an impossible task, though its attempt had been an admirable one. No machine, Thoreau ultimately concludes, is capable of accomplishing the salvation of mankind. All of Thoreau's own "mechanical" or technological ventures, such as pencil-making and surveying, proved unsuccessful in relation to his literary career: Apollo was constantly berating Admetus. Thus, it remains for the wild to be preserved, and not for the machine to be either transformed or destroyed.

"Ktaadn" closes with Thoreau's initial notion of the conservation ethic: expressed in 1848, he retains it for the rest of his life as one of his deepest convictions; it becomes his practical bequest to humanity. In other of his confrontations with man and machine (even in Walden, published six years after "Ktaadn"), Thoreau had sought to resolve the conflict of the artist in such a mechanical world in a symbolic way. Here, however, he offers a concrete and tangible alternative to rampant industrialism:

the preservation of valuable acres of natural tracts, the veneration of the wilderness. "Ktaadn" concludes with Thoreau's appeal that man permit the natural world to remain intact. Fortified by his acceptance of man's proper place in nature, he can speak of "the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest" and even anticipate joyfully the possibility of death in such a realm: "What a place to live, what a place to die and be buried in! There certainly men would live forever, and laugh at death and the grave" (W, III, 108-09).²⁷

"Chesuncook," published ten years after "Ktaadn," emphatically reinforces the doctrine of conservation, as does the final chapter of The Maine Woods, "Allegash and East Branch." In the former Thoreau describes seeing a moose shot and skinned by his guide, and foresees "the doom of the wilderness"²⁸; "I trust that I shall have a better excuse for killing a moose than that I may hang my hat on his horns," he says cynically (W, III, 118), later referring to the incident as "the afternoon's tragedy" (W, III, 160). Observing the destruction of numerous pines, he reflects somberly: "How far men go for the material of their houses!

²⁷ Sherman Paul, Shores, p. 362, points out that Thoreau's discovery of nature's terrors in "Ktaadn" led to the "chastened primitivism" of Walden and his later works, whereby he prevented himself from going further back in history than "the life of the Indian," so that "thereafter, visions of a more genial and humanized nature invaded his mind" and he was still able "to maintain his belief in the virtue of the wild."

²⁸ Ibid., p. 363.

The inhabitants of the most civilized cities, in all ages, send into far, primitive forests, beyond the bounds of their civilization, where the moose and bear and savage dwell, for their pine boards for ordinary use" (W, III, 146). Nowhere is Thoreau's plea for conservation more noble or all-encompassing than when he asserts, "Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it" (W, III, 164).

For Thoreau, therefore, everything within nature deserves the right to exist. The pine, he maintains, "is no more lumber than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure" (W, III, 163). Moreover, for Thoreau, "the living spirit" of a pine tree "is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still" (W, III, 165).²⁹ But unfortunately, Thoreau finds, the poet has been preceded in the forest by the logger and pioneer, men who have "humanized Nature for him" (W, III, 212). The central question which he raises at the end of "Chesuncook" is whether the wilderness can in fact be spared: "Why should not we . . . have our national preserves, . . . in which the

²⁹ As Harding reveals in A Thoreau Handbook, p. 75, this sentence "so offended James Russell Lowell that he deleted it before 'Chesuncook' appeared in the Atlantic, and so brought Thoreau's wrath down upon his head. But the sentence was restored in the book."

bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be 'civilized off the face of the earth,'--our forests . . . not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation?" (W, III, 212-13).

Lest the import of his notion of conservation go unheeded, Thoreau reiterates it in the unfinished "Allegash" chapter. As McAleer observes, the chapter contains a brief but poignant plea "for the retreating wilderness," Thoreau's last bit of "transcendental didacticism" in The Maine Woods.³⁰ Thoreau berates the extensive damming of lakes, a process whereby men turn "the forces of nature against herself, that they might float their spoils out of the country" (W, III, 312); the loggers are "ten thousand vermin gnawing at the base" of nature's finest trees until, when the trees have fallen, "they scamper off to ransack some new wilderness, and all is still again" (W, III, 312-13). Clearly Thoreau's concern for the future of the natural environment remained with him until his death. His legacy in The Maine Woods, the conservation ethic, is also an unmistakable warning to his surviving kinsmen.

IV

The rather terrifying vision of nature's majestic indifference to man which Thoreau expressed in "Ktaadn"

³⁰ "Therapeutic Vituperations," pp. 86-87.

is conveyed again in the pages of Cape Cod, a book whose significance has frequently been overlooked. The work, published posthumously in 1864 with portions published serially prior to that date,³¹ was in an unfinished state at the time of Thoreau's death.³² Yet Cape Cod is crucial as one of Thoreau's final pronouncements on death and the immortality that comes from total acceptance of the wild. As McAleer observes, Thoreau, in his "purposeful visits" to Maine and Cape Cod in the 1850's, was "a virtual wayfarer of the wilderness periodically checking his spiritual traplines."³³ And one of the vital lessons which the physically failing Thoreau made on such excursions, and came to report so jubilantly even on his death-bed, was "that man fulfills himself not in striving to make Nature correspond to himself but in his discovering and complying with his own correspondence to Nature."³⁴

One of the very first events mentioned in Cape Cod is the shipwreck of the St. John, an Irish brig carrying emigrants to America. "'Death! one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset,'" (W, IV, 3), Thoreau reads

³¹ Harding, A Thoreau Handbook, p. 76. Sections appeared in the June, July, and August 1855 numbers of Putnam's Monthly Magazine, and additional chapters appeared after Thoreau's death in the Atlantic Monthly for October and December, 1864.

³² Ibid., p. 77.

³³ "Thoreau's Epic 'Cape Cod,'" p. 228.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 229.

on a handbill and inevitably he follows the throngs of mourning relatives to that locale. His reaction to the disaster is, at first glance, surprisingly callous. As he observes the funeral procession for the victims of the wreck, he seems to dismiss the deaths as trivial: "On the whole," he says, "it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more" (W, IV, 11). Moreover, he offers his condolences to the world of nature, not to man: "I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity?" (W, IV, 11). Like the old man who gathers sea-weed, for whom the bodies on the shore are "but other weeds . . . which were of no use to him" (W, IV, 11), Thoreau seems to have no deference for the dead; all his reverence is, apparently, reserved for nature.

Thoreau, not clouded with illusions about the vastness and titanic forces of the wild (any illusions about nature were shattered atop Mt. Katahdin), can consequently revel in the sheer force and turbulence of the sea. The seashore, he maintains, "is a wild rank place, and there is no flattery in it. . . . There is naked Nature,--inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray" (W, IV, 224). The sea is implacable and totally impartial: "vast and wild as

it is, [it] bears thus the waste and wrecks of human art to its remotest shore. There is no telling what it may not vomit up. It lets nothing lie . . ." (W, IV, 137). And, more than this, the sea is the primeval realm that contains the secrets of man's very origin: "Before the land rose out of the ocean, and became dry land, chaos reigned; and between high and low water mark, where she is partially disrobed and rising, a sort of chaos reigns still . . ." (W, IV, 81-82). Thoreau, as he stands on the shore, which he considers "a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world," comes to the understanding that "we, too, are the product of sea-slime" (W, IV, 224).

What is so significant about the sea, what is so awesome and overwhelming to Thoreau, is not the mere power of the breakers (W, IV, 66) or the ability of the sea to dash man and his human contrivances to pieces (W, IV, 137). The ultimate import of the ocean--of utter wildness--upon man is that it is the source not only of man's origin and of his decay (at least in a metaphorical way), but also of his immortality. This is why Thoreau can scorn the superficial obsession with corpses; he is far more concerned with man's soul than his body. Thus, Thoreau realizes that if nature can arbitrarily cast corpses from the edge of a storm-tossed sea, it can also transport man's soul to a higher world that no mortal can describe.

Thoreau, branded as an atheist by some of his detractors,³⁵ expresses, although vaguely, an undeniable belief in an after-life, as he speculates upon the harsh fact of death after observing the aftermath of the St. John shipwreck:

Why care we for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did,-- they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence-- though it has not yet been discovered by science--than Columbus had of this: not merely mariners' tales and some paltry drift-wood and seaweed, but a continual drift and instinct to all our shores. (W, IV, 12-13)

Again, as he observes men loading the remnants of the Franklin, another shipwrecked craft, into a cart, he reminisces about his own previous search for "the relics of a human body, mangled by sharks," after the sea had cast its victim ashore, a week after a shipwreck (W, IV, 126). Thoreau describes the scene of absolute devastation quite realistically; what is noteworthy is the way in which he views the corpses as being in complete harmony with nature. Ironically, it is he, the observer of such a sobering spectacle, who is out of place:

Close at hand they were simply some bones with a little flesh adhering to them, in fact, only a slight inequality

³⁵ Walter Harding, ed., Thoreau: Man of Concord (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. vii, describes one such case: "I know of one dear old lady who once each year makes a pilgrimage to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord where Thoreau is buried, and there, after laying wreaths of flowers on the nearby graves of Emerson and Hawthorne, turns to Thoreau's grave, and shaking her fist, says, 'None for you, you dirty little atheist.'"

in the sweep of the shore. There was nothing at all remarkable about them, and they were singularly inoffensive both to the senses and the imagination. But as I stood there they grew more and more imposing. They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my snivelling sympathies. That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it. (W, IV, 127)

For Thoreau, who, as he admits, "did not intend this for a sentimental journey" (W, IV, 91), the victim of a shipwreck, if he goes to Heaven, finds a safer port than Boston Harbor (W, IV, 13); though "Infants by the score [are] dashed on the rocks by the enraged Atlantic Ocean," Thoreau refuses to shed idle tears, for even the strongest of winds "cannot stagger a Spirit" (W, IV, 13). Nature, then, is as much a place of death as it is of life; however, it is also the place where man can paradoxically die into immortality or, as Thoreau would have it, be shipwrecked into salvation.³⁶

As Cape Cod concludes, Thoreau is alone with the sea, chastened by his awareness of the impermanence of life and yet cheered by the prospect of immortality, of the ability of man's spirit to outlast the seemingly timeless sea.

"A man," he says reverentially, "may stand there and put

³⁶ Theodore Dreiser, The Living Thoughts of Thoreau (1939; rpt. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1963), p. 29 testifies to Thoreau's acknowledgment of a benevolent divine force at work even in the midst of death and disaster: "Thoreau, like the prophet Job can cry, as by implication he does: 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.'"

all America behind him" (W, IV, 331). A man, in other words, when fronting nature at her most savage and yet her most sublime, is capable of answering the vital questions of his very existence. "Who are we? where are we?" (W, III, 95), Thoreau had asked in "Ktaadn." Now, as he scans the vast horizon, he comes to answer his own questions. Man, as Cape Cod reveals, is a finite creature in a finite world. His soul alone will survive. McAleer raises a vital question about Thoreau's stance at the end of "his epic journey on Cape Cod": "Has Thoreau chosen the Great Beach in preference to the Great Society? Or, to be more specific, has he turned his back on civilization or his face toward Nature?"³⁷ The answer is unmistakably clear. Man must forsake his obsession with trivial pursuits, his ventures to seek a "progress" that lacks spirituality. If he is willing to do so, and to confront nature and accept it on its own terms, his rejection of life's superfluties can become for him, as it did for Thoreau, an act of healthy affirmation.³⁸ The sea which Thoreau describes at the end of Cape Cod is the Sea of Faith.

³⁷ "Thoreau's Epic 'Cape Cod,'" p. 246.

³⁸ As McAleer, ibid., puts it, "the negations of Henry David Thoreau were, like those of Nature herself, the preface to affirmatives."

CONCLUSION

The impact of Thoreau's criticism of man and his institutions and inventions has been considered from countless perspectives, as even the few examples that follow will indicate. Emerson, in his oft-reprinted funeral oration, established Thoreau's reputation as a recluse, a "hermit and stoic,"¹ who "had no ambition" (RWE in W, X, 29). Yet if Emerson failed to regard Thoreau's disdain for life's trivialities as little more than a desire to be "the captain of a huckleberry party" (RWE in W, X, 29), he did, at least, recognize the fundamental concern for mankind which was at the very center of Thoreau's social criticism: "No truer American existed than Thoreau," he boasts. "What he sought was the most energetic nature" (RWE in W, X, 9). In his total approach to living, "Thoreau was sincerity itself, and might fortify the convictions of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living" (RWE in W, X, 26). James Russell Lowell, writing for the North American Review in October, 1865, was more severe. He attacked Thoreau's refusal to engage in the dehumanizing activities of life as utter indolence: "Was he indolent, he finds none of the activities which

¹ Emerson's "Biographical Sketch" of Thoreau is taken from Thoreau's Writings (Riverside Edition), X, 6 and subsequent references to the essay will appear with the designation "W" and the volume and page number, preceded by "RWE in"--all in parentheses.

attract or employ the rest of mankind worthy of him. Was he wanting in qualities that make success, it is success that is contemptible, and not himself that lacks persistency and purpose."² Lowell, moreover, rejected Thoreau's wildness as absurd and insincere: "Mr. Thoreau seems to me to insist in public on going back to flint and steel, when there is a match-box in his pocket which he knows very well how to use at a pinch."³ But what Lowell overlooks is that Thoreau's life-long criticism of man and machine, his utterances on the subject as both artist and, towards the end, ardent conservationist, allowed for the necessity--and even the desirability--of progress. As Thoreau himself puts it in Walden, "civilization is a real advance in the condition of man," though the advantages, Thoreau finds, are rather dearly bought (W, II, 51). Another of Thoreau's nineteenth-century critics, Robert Louis Stevenson, in his "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions" (1880), assailed Thoreau's sallies against the contemporary economic system because "he attacks it in a new dialect where there are no catchwords ready made for the defender"; he sees Thoreau, therefore, as "an assailant who does not scruple to hit below the belt."⁴ Yet Stevenson

² "Thoreau," North American Review, 101 (1865), rpt. in The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Wendell Glick (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 38.

³ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴ "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions," Cornhill Magazine, 41 (1880), rpt. in Recognition, ed. Glick, p. 70.

was compelled to admit that Thoreau's "unfriendly criticism of life as it goes on in our societies" was his true forte: "it is there that he best displays the freshness and surprising trenchancy of his intellect."⁵ By the time Stevenson came to write of Thoreau in his "Preface" to Familiar Studies of Men and Books (1911), he avowed that even Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond was motivated "not merely with designs of self-improvement, but to serve mankind in the highest sense."⁶

Twentieth-century critics have generally seemed more cognizant of the significance of Thoreau's criticism of man and machine.⁷ Mark Van Doren, for example, considers the single-minded quality of Thoreau's remarks as a virtue; it makes Thoreau, in his study of man and his environment, "valuable as a protestant, valuable as an antidotal flavor."⁸ Joseph Wood Krutch praises Thoreau's prescience: "He lived at the beginning of the great era of invention and of industrial expansion. He predicted the failure of a great experiment that was just being tried. We are living at the disillusioned end of at least one epoch of

⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶ "Preface, by Way of Criticism," Familiar Studies of Men and Books (1911), rpt. in Recognition, ed. Glick, p. 89.

⁷ For antidotes to the sympathetic criticism, however, see, among others Edel, Henry D. Thoreau and Marx, "Introduction" to Excursions, pp. v-xiv.

⁸ Henry David Thoreau: A Critical Study (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), p. 127.

expansion, and what must have seemed to most of his contemporaries mere crankiness and perversity seems less obviously that today."⁹ George F. Whicher detects the way in which Thoreau's doctrine of wildness came to be an expression of man's hope for self-betterment: "Toward the end of his life Thoreau ceased to look to nature as a means of romantic escape. He had come to see that wildness begins at home."¹⁰ And Joseph Ishill speaks of Thoreau's fundamental love for his fellow men, even when he chides them for their frailties; this love, he says, is "the secret of Thoreau's story," and it reveals "the sincerity and heroism of his life."¹¹

The list of commentators, obviously, is extensive, and prolonged summation of critical estimations regarding Thoreau's attitude toward the material world is better left to the comprehensive and well-edited collections of pertinent essays.¹² Perhaps the best epitaph for Thoreau,

⁹ "The Steady Fascination of Thoreau," The New York Times Book Review, 20 May 1951, rpt. in Recognition, ed. Glick, p. 301.

¹⁰ Walden Revisited: A Centennial Tribute to Henry David Thoreau (Chicago: Packard and Co., 1945), p. 93.

¹¹ Thoreau: The Cosmic Yankee (Berkeley Heights, N. J.: The Oriole Press, 1954), p. 34.

¹² Among such collections are the following: McAleer, ed., Artist and Citizen Thoreau; Glick, ed., Recognition; John R. Hicks, ed., Thoreau: A Centenary Gathering in The Massachusetts Review, 4 (1962), 41-172; Walter Harding, ed., Thoreau: A Century of Criticism (Dallas: S.M.U. Press, 1954); Paul, ed., Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays; and Ruland, ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden.

the foe of mindless mechanization of any sort and the champion of the wilderness, is his own cogent essay, "Life without Principle." The essay, published in October, 1863 in the Atlantic Monthly, was based on Journal material for 1851-1855 and was one of the last pieces that received the revisions of the dying Thoreau; it is, as Harding puts it, a highly concentrated work that, as Thoreau's "essay on 'Self-reliance,'" "contains virtually all the fundamental principles upon which he based his life."¹³ The subject of the essay is "the way in which we spend our lives" (W, X, 254); sadly, Thoreau observes that far too frequently "This world is a place of business," marked by "an infinite bustle" and "nothing but work, work, work" (W, X, 254).

Thoreau, refusing to succumb to the coarseness and boisterousness of such a life, asks man to consider the profits of his activities: "If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself" (W, X, 257). Even among the world's preachers, Thoreau finds "few moral teachers" (W, X, 269). Thoreau, at the risk of being labelled a loafer, or even worse, a creature lacking in spiritual conviction, defies such shallow pursuits as he observes--disdains such prophets as "are employed in excusing the ways of men" (W, X, 269)--and reaches the conviction that "A man had better

¹³ A Thoreau Handbook, p. 72.

starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread" (W, X, 270). As an artist he will not allow himself to become obsessed, like his superficial neighbors, with "the stalest repetition" of life's daily commonplaces (W, X, 274): "It is important to preserve the mind's chastity in this respect," he affirms (W, X, 276).

All his life, Thoreau had examined society and its most advanced technological productions. His findings are bleak indeed: "The chief want, in every State that I have been into, was a high and earnest purpose in its inhabitants" (W, X, 284). The key to man's moral failure, Thoreau has discovered, lies in his abuse of nature: when man ravages "'the great resources' of Nature, and at last taxes her beyond her resources," he "naturally dies out of her" (W, X, 284). Thoreau, rather than surrender to such a life, made the painful decision to isolate himself (at least symbolically) in order to save his soul--and to suggest to others how to avoid the disaster of "intellectual and moral suicide" (W, X, 277). As he puts it so loftily in what might be taken as his "motto": "Read not the Times. Read the Eternities" (W, X, 279). For Thoreau, the trivialities of "getting a living" posed a serious threat to the artistic imagination: "I believe," he states with conviction, "that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality" (W, X,

278). Ultimately, Thoreau the pencil-maker, the surveyor, the "respectable" citizen with an acceptable "profession" (in the eyes of society), could not allow himself to be "paid for being something less than a man" (W, X, 258). Accordingly, he preferred the ponds and rivers, the mountain forests and streams, the sea--nature at all seasons and in all its changing moods--to the shallow company of society and the frenzied pursuit of trades. In Robert Frost's words, Thoreau undertook a veritable "crusade" in order to "redress the insults and the rebuffs man has given nature."¹⁴

Emerson, in his oration at Thoreau's funeral, speculated: "I think the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society" (RWE in W, X, 27). Lewis P. Simpson makes essentially the same point more than a century later when he wonders whether "Thoreau's intensely personal representation of the literary life in America may have been a deprivation as well as an enrichment of it."¹⁵ It is true that Thoreau, who had encouraged man to "get your living by loving" (W, X, 261), believed that he could do this most effectively in his own life by choosing "some path, however solitary

¹⁴ Frost, quoted by Wade Van Dore, "'I'd rather believe in inspiration,'" Yankee, Nov. 1971, p. 207.

¹⁵ "Literary Ecumenicalism of the American Enlightenment," in The Ibero-American Enlightenment, ed. A. Owen Aldridge (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 332.

and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence" (W, X, 267). Yet it is equally true that Thoreau loved mankind as well as himself. He chose, by his sometimes bitter, sometimes playful, yet always earnest and sincere criticism of man and machine, a difficult course to convey this love. Yet he was not afraid of being misunderstood and, what is more important, he died with no bitterness or illusions about what he had done. "I shall leave this world without regret," he told a friend on his death-bed.¹⁶ And to another, who had described his simple pleasure upon having sighted a spring robin, Thoreau replied blissfully, "'Yes! this is a beautiful world; but I shall see a fairer.'"¹⁷

¹⁶ Thoreau, quoted in Harding, Days, p. 462.

¹⁷ Thoreau, quoted ibid.

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